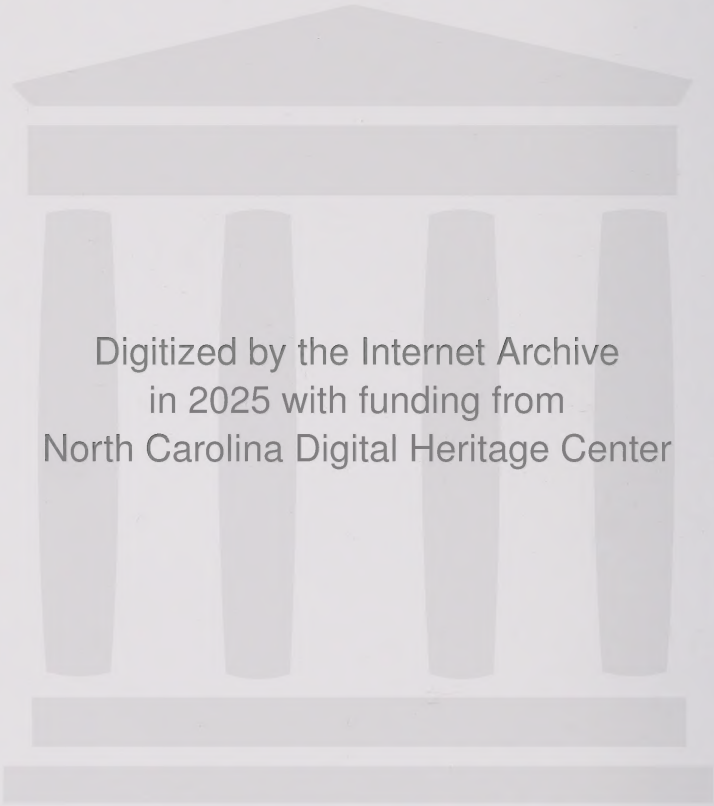
The Rhapsodist

2024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The Rhapsodist

Spring 2024

Asheville-Buncombe Technical Community College
Asheville, NC

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rhapsodist, n.

Pronunciation: Brit. /'rapsĕd ist/ , U.S. /'ræpsĕdist/
Etymology: < rhapsody n. + -ist suffix.
Compare French rhapsodiste ...

1. A collector of miscellaneous literary pieces. Now hist. and rare.

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A-B Tech's Student Services Department

Editors' Note:

"I want to give you something, or I want to take/ something from you. But I want to feel the exchange,/ the warm hand on the shoulder, the song coming out/ and the ear holding onto it."

—Ada Limon

Dear Reader,

As A-B Tech's primary venue for literature and fine art, *The Rhapsodist* showcases the best examples of creative expression from our college's diverse population. We hope you enjoy this year's issue of writing and art — a meaningful "exchange" that illuminates and heals. Thank you for your continued support of *The Rhapsodist*.

Limon, Ada. "How Far Away We Are." *Bright Dead Things*, Milkweed, 2015, p.12.

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Quartet of Fallen Angels

Bam L. McDermott

Little Moments

Grace A. Wray

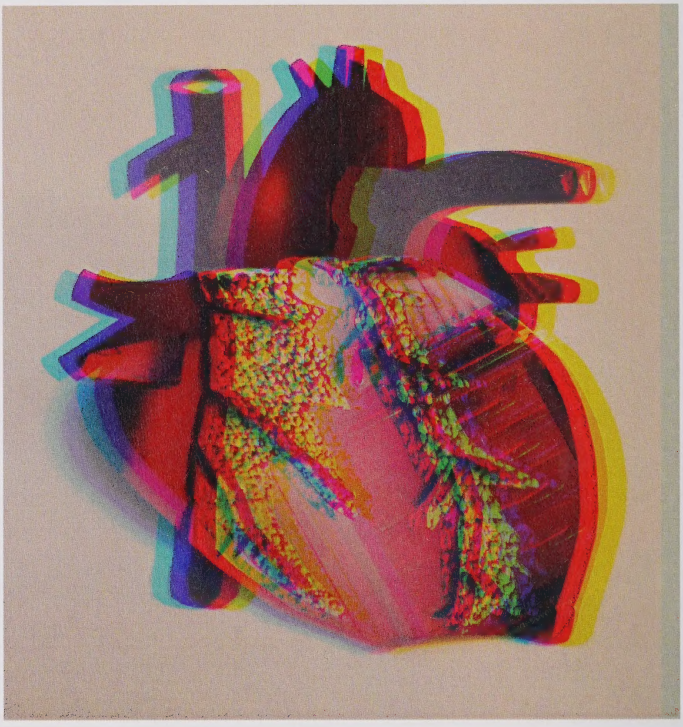
A Commitment to Red

Jasmine Gabrielle Willett

I have a commitment to red.
Call it a declaration of ownership,
Like the way she sprawls out on my newly made bed.
In the language of delicacy, we've obtained our fluency;
Nobody could mistake what has been said
From the way we stand intertwined at the hip
To my auburn strands, she weaves like thread,
Never failing to surprise me.
With words only spoken in my head
She offers a gulp and never a sip,
Like the bartender from north Port Alfred
Who told us there's nothing worse than being at sea
While your lover's far away in someone else's bed.
And with that, my heart's keeper gave a heavy tip
Then looked at me and said,
You shall never feel blue on account of me
For I have a commitment to red.

Beats

Shana Zimnoch



A Version of You

Stephanie Harper

Our old apartment was a unit from the fifties, but one that I made cute inside with random stuff off Craigslist. My treasures were from Danville, the cream of the crop of second-hand finds where rich people listed fast sales just to clear out their McMansions. There was a window that let the light in and allowed us to see who was home as they made their way to their unit. Fast steps with a cheery hello was our neighbor Carmen. She always smelled like cheap perfume probably from the CVS down the street and was almost always drunk. I knew because anytime I'd say hello and the door was open, I could smell her sickly-sweet breath through the screen. A whistle followed by a song was always the neighbor next to Carmen, whose name I forget. Aaron? He was always peeping out of his bent-up window blinds because he was paranoid someone would break in.

Now we are here. Going to go sift through what is left behind in the form of monetary value—what you essentially left for us to survive these next few months, maybe years, alone.

I reached out to grab the handle of the door; above it was the address staring at me in faded, white letters: 320 Davis Street, San Leandro, CA 94577. Maeve swiped my hand away in an attempt to open it herself as a loud, perky voice escaped from inside, announcing someone's name. It reminded me of that scene in *Beetlejuice* when the couple go to visit the empty, sterile Netherworld waiting room unaware of what to expect but still curious and drawn in. I tried looking for a handbook for the newly widowed near the entrance but didn't see anything. I had you with me during this visit even though it had been a few months since you left us. I made sense

of this logic to remind myself you're still here.

Maeve was by my side, although I could tell she was scanning the eighteen inches in front of her with deep curiosity. At just two years old, she was already astute in the art of people watching.

Her head moves like yours did; she can shapeshift in her surroundings with the same charm you had.

She was only nearly two, having had her birthday just before you left us for Chicago. She is your twin: she has brown hair and hazel blue eyes. She has your laugh—boisterous and loud then trails off in a giggly breath like it was a trademark. All her charm is a replica of all the times you'd fuck up without even a curse or bad mention handed to you. Her uncanny ability to be loved by all is the epitome of your best fuckups, only she doesn't carry the weight of your bad decisions on her shoulders. Her innocence is what's kept her from turning into you altogether. She is active and can't be in one place for too long—sugar is her fuel.

I had a hard time figuring out where to sit us, and this all depended on the seats. I preferred plastic seating in most places and despised cloth seating in any capacity. The seats here had both, and this threw me into a whirlwind of disgust. I whizzed about through each row, Maeve in tow, trying to find the perfect spot for us to sit in, making my selection like I would a rental property: spacious, clean, available now, no nosy neighbors. I found some chairs without fabric at the end of the row with only one seat between me and someone else. She was restless in her space, looking at all the people around us in the eyes as if they had an unsaid understanding between them. I saw some amused looks shoot her way, and I knew I'd need to be productive in keeping her near. I was tired though. My stomach growled, and I realized I hadn't eaten.

Food was the last thing on my mind and was meant only for keeping my kid fed. But me, I'd wait until the pangs of hunger in my captive stomach called after me, begging me to give it sustenance every day. I found a baggie of Cheez-Its at the bottom of my bag

which wasn't Maeve's first choice as told by the sour look on her face. I slung it in her orbit.

I've resorted to getting lost in blank moments where most moms would take in a page from a book or sip some water down.

You had bought us garlic crab on Valentine's Day and picked out a ring with an Irish inscription of protection engraved on it: "May the road rise up to meet you...." You were so proud of your gifts. You were proud you were having a good day and soaked it all up during dinner, joking and laughing your loud laugh that reached beyond our window and spilled onto the parking lot. You weren't even Irish. You were adopted and always wanted to know how you came into this world. After you left, I did some research and found out after signing Maeve up on one of those DNA sites that you were, in fact, Scottish.

You'd laugh at that. I'm laughing at you now.

We were just two neighbors who happened to fall in love. I was wearing a beanie with "FBI" on it because I thought it was cool, mockingly so. Nineties humor was spot on and surprisingly cheap to uphold. That beanie was at every accessory store in the mall in an array of colors and on every corner next to the strawberry stands and Mexican corn carts. I was leaving my apartment in a rush. You were standing at the bottom. I brushed up against you, smiling. You didn't know this, but I smelled you in.

You reeked of cigarettes, cologne, and charm. You winced, re-reading my beanie, asking if the FBI stood for "fine bodies incorporated." It was so cheesy that you laughed after you said it, but I was smitten, and I got to see you without a shirt from time to time so it wasn't a deal breaker—you were in very good shape with the abs and all, gifting me with daily eye candy.

My roommate was my best friend, and sometimes we'd come out and smoke and pretend to talk loudly so you could come join us. After a few times, you caught on and became the third leg who always had a light. Then cigarette breaks became phone calls,

talking for hours in our respective rooms until I started popping over to your place to watch you clean and organize while we talked about your favorite books. Those conversations transformed into post-work hangouts where we'd get sloshed on empty stomachs, and smoke ourselves into horny oblivion, waking up naked and intertwined on top of your bed covers. One of these nights we conceived Maeve, under the fuzzy intoxication that eluded us by morning.

"How you doin, kid?" You'd ask me this when you were passing time or when you knew you did something wrong. You'd ask a lot as a precursor to our smoking sessions. I think, sometimes, you'd ask when you just wanted validation that I was still around and still wanting to be with you. It's like you'd come to the conclusion that our union was temporary. I wouldn't reply. I learned to sit in silence with those I care most about from the moments smoking with you. I think we needed that time to ourselves in each other's company, listening to the puffs we'd blow out, de-coding how we felt simply by how forceful or gentle the smoke left our lips—stewing in our feelings while enjoying the silence.

It's funny to think you will never smoke again. Funny in a sad way, I guess, because that's all I do now thanks to you.

I fake smiled through the stiffness that took hold in my chest, and I was back in my chair as Maeve sat still crunching each cracker, completely aware that I was having another moment as if to say, ok mom I can behave for you this one time. My free pass, to do whatever I wanted and become unhinged. Her mouth was covered in cheese powder, and I raised my eyes with a nod to ask for one. She handed me a pile and I tossed them all in my mouth.

I heard our number called followed by the same blinking number on the wall, telling us in stop motion fashion, hurry up, hurry up, hurry up. I jumped up and pulled everything into my arms, my purse, the baggie of half-eaten crackers, and a crumpled up brochure Maeve found under the seat about marriage licenses.

We sat down where an older man with a striped wool sweat-

er sat. He picked up a paper from an intentional pile and asked me what my name was. I told him. His name was Jim. Maeve waved at him, introduced herself, and said hello. He smiled a bit longer at her then glanced back at me as he adjusted in his seat a bit. He asked me for my social and found my name, and I could tell he was scrolling down on his computer trying to uncover our situation. I pretended I was busy, shaking my head over to Maeve who was swinging her feet under her chair, hitting the bottom bar with an annoying thump. I put my hand over her knee, and she stopped, clearly agitated since she was now shaking her head at me.

Jim found my name, and he ran his hand through his curly, brown and gray peppered hair, sitting back with a sigh. The heaviness of what he just read was on his face. He looked concerned.

Your death certificate had already been processed through the government's system. It made sense. I was wondering when I'd know. It had been about a month since I received the call from your best friend in Chicago. She called me a complete mess, crying, when I was at work chatting with my Uncle on Yahoo Messenger about sales shit. I had to call her on my company Blackberry because I rushed out of the office for privacy and forgot my cell.

Did you know I flew from California to Chicago to be closer to your ashes?

You passed away a day before my birthday in the town where you were born, and somehow all I could think of was how often I'd be thinking of you. Every year, way too drunk, asking myself how you managed to die considering you loved your habit more than the life we were clinging to. I never understood what an accidental overdose meant. To me, it felt like it was an obligatory excuse for you because you were not...intentional...about going too far. There was a poem at your desk which wasn't surprising. You liked to write, so it was fitting that you were doing a deep dive of your life before the end. I wondered if this was your way of leaving behind a birthday gift for me.

"How you doin, kid?" Not fucking good!

Jim had some questions stewing, and I could see them floating above his head as he pondered, looking at us, careful to not be rude: How did he die? How terrifying—where will you live? Do you have help? He slipped us these questions through translated looks, hesitating with every breath. In between each breath was an unsaid invitation for me to respond in some way yet I didn't know what to say.

I had become impatient with him in his moment of curiosity and sadness. I was full on sobbing, tears streaming down my face and into the corners of my mouth, the saltiness of cheese crackers and tears invading my tongue. Maeve wrapped her little arms around one of mine as I drew her in closer, my head resting on hers. Jim reached into his bottom drawer like he'd done it before, pulled out a box of tissue and put it in front of me as a humble gesture.

"I'm not sure what to do right now. I feel as though I'm drifting through the days," I blurted out, more tears escaping.

I can see you in a corner of the office, kneeling down and shaking your head in disappointment. At me? At yourself? "How you doin, kid..."

He said, "It's going to be ok. You're still young and have so much life to live." He was swift and gentle, taking me though each step on every form explaining to me what would happen next and when. After signing on a bunch of lines and answering more questions, he ended our appointment. "You're all taken care of. This should help you both out."

I thanked him with a weak handshake; my instinct told me to hug him, but I got the feeling that'd make us connected forever and that was too hard for me to bear. "It's going to be ok. You're still young and have so much life to live." Jim's words became a mantra, a reminder I repeated to myself anytime I needed a moment to keep myself whole. I silently thank him in front of my bookshelf altar, asking for his guidance like one of my ancestors.

Maeve was done with this visit and my version of this visit. She asked me if we could get ice cream in the parking lot, her eyebrows darting inward with a sweet gesture of prayer hands as she got into her begging stance. When I said yes, she jumped up in the air and did a dance on the spot. I saw a woman laugh and clap in her direction. Someone else whistled from behind us, and Maeve had a huge smile on her face, satisfied with my answer and because she'd gotten her way. I smiled back and didn't care that she didn't know why we had come here to begin with.

After the Flood You Will Go to the Laundromat

Nilah Wharton

the wednesday after the flood, you will go to the
laundromat

you will load the clothes you still have left into clean metal beasts
and pay
eight dollars
and twenty five cents
per load
(you will wonder at your privileged youth, to not have to know that
laundry cost so many quarters)

as your mother's towels spin, you will sit in the sun and
copy down the list
of things you lost to the dirty water

(you will wonder what it means
to mourn over objects

you will write in damp black ink

seventeen t-shirts

that is all you will have left of them)

the wednesday after the flood, you will move your brothers'
school clothes
into a pristine dryer and a
stranger
will tap your shoulder and hand you a
sock
you left
in the washing machine

you will say
thank you

he will say
do you know
you will not be drowning forever?

after the flood, you will again be
clean

Stage Fright

Gracie Blue Craft

Summer's Coming On

Ash Kaleb Marquis

Sheltered Summer slept on our tongues,
crackled on our breath,
ran barefoot through the shag carpet,
next to my head, and out the window,
turning pirouettes on the silent car park.

Summer sauntered into your steaming living room,
slid into your sofa
while we dared each other drunk,
giggled on a park swing
as we sucked on the sticks of ice cream bars.

Summer sang "Love Story" outside the covid test room,
wore two masks into the cafeteria
and collected brownies under the table,
churned mason jar "frosting:" coffee sugar packets and almond milk,
wandered to the sidewalk at 6am to watch our last sunrise.

Summer sent one text a week,
rode into New Orleans over the ocean.
Lightning cracked sparse clouds
ten hours too close to your tongue.

Wandering

Bronwen G. McCormick

Ask Me in the Morning

Calliope P. L. Taylor

Dear Anna,

It's funny what you remember...when the world crumbles beneath you. How fragile your grasp is on life and love and all the little insignificant details that make up who we are. I remember the feather-light touch of your fingertips. How...your pinky nail chipped and you unconsciously bit it away until your finger bled. I don't think you noticed even then. But I did. I remember how you'd cut away at your clothes to make them fit just right when everything came factory-made just a little too large for your petite frame. You never liked the way tags felt against your skin. The way they scratched and itched. You'd reach behind your neck and rip it out like a sad page in a romance novel. Like comfort was the happy ending you thought the couple deserved.

I hate the word deserve.

"Do you prefer sunrise or sunset?"

"What do you mean?"

You rolled over and stared at me in the dim light of night. Dark eyes gleamed. You'd ask me what I thought about so many insignificant things. What color the flavor of moonlight would be if we bottled it and sold it as candy or if I would still love you if you were a worm? You asked with such sincerity, holding your breath against the answer I gave.

Ask me again.

"If you could only see it one more time...would you watch the sunrise or the sunset?"

Maybe it was because it had gotten so late, the room so dark, the sheets too itchy...but I didn't answer you. I should have answered you when I could, instead all I said was...

"Just go to sleep."

It's funny what you remember because...I never noticed your body stiffen next to me. When you held your breath, I thought maybe you were counting sheep. I was already half asleep when you got out of bed. No footsteps on the carpet floor; you never even turned on the light. The slight wheezing sound of the faucet annoyed me. The quiet clink of glass on the counter and you were back to bed like you'd never left. All I wanted was to go to sleep. I almost asked you for one of your sleeping pills, but I knew you hoarded those for a rainy day. Plus, I was too tired to get up and ask. It had been a long day, and you had listened to me bitch about order numbers and lost tracking information with all the patience and loyalty of someone who'd never want to be anywhere but there with me. There was always tomorrow. I could answer your questions tomorrow.

Ask me again. I'll answer every night.

Sunlight filtered through the barely split curtain and rested gracefully against my closed eyes. Sunlight never hurts quite as much as it does in the morning after a night of restless sleep. It's hot and bright and the exact opposite of everything that feels right when you've made peace with

your comforters. And you were there, body curled up tight away from me as if in protest of the dawning day. I remember how gently your arms looked wrapped gracefully around the pillow in your arms, face buried in its warmth. Dark hair somehow still in neat curls stood out stark against the sheets.

I should have counted those pills.

I left you there. Turned off my alarm before it could wake you. You must have been tired, you slept so peacefully. You never even stirred. Maybe it was because I had just woken up, or maybe it was because I never learned how to care enough but... I didn't see the stillness in you.

I should have seen it.
I should have seen you.
Laying there.

—

"I see you've started writing again, Avery. That's good. It's been some time." She shuffles my undelivered letters together and sets them on the side table beside her. My fingers twitch, itching to take them back.

The room feels cold despite the old space heater sputtering in the corner. It's sterile but crowded in here. The way she lines up the items on her desk with neat precision—her laptop centered and surrounded by clean notepads and pens. No pictures of her family. No knickknacks. An office trash can sits next to her desk...I can almost see the notes from our session being "filed" away in it just after I leave. She's sitting across the coffee table from me, stiff-backed and in a nicely pressed olive suit. Her nails are painted rose gold and tap impatiently with her pencil. I don't think she even knows she does that. I'm on a large, overly plushy brown couch, no extra pillows

to hold onto for comfort. To hide behind. There's something wrong about a place that tries too hard to feel like home.

If walls can be an imposter, these ones are. The way they hoard secrets and couch confessions, coaxing them out of you with a false promise of relief. Like the girl sitting alone in the waiting room; I pass her every week when I leave. It's the middle of the summer, but I know she'll be wearing long sleeves with the fabric pulled over her hands like she's got something to hide. Or the hollow-faced boy in the mornings I pass on my way in. I imagine him being consumed by this couch. Our therapist doesn't care how small he looks sitting there, or how uncomfortable it is to be under her gaze. She doesn't care why he can't get himself to eat...she just wants progress. The walls crave more secrets.

"I...I just want to get it out." Meek. I sound meek.

"I understand. You know, Avery, you've been coming to see me for a few months now. But you haven't talked about what happened after you woke up."

Laying there. Motionless.

"Maybe talking to me would help you relieve some of that pressure?"

Her voice grates against my mind. Mechanical. There's no warmth there. No understanding. Everything about her screams *AI*. I could almost see her as a real person, but the way she assesses me makes me untrusting. She doesn't blink enough. Just watches me with cold eyes and asks me questions she knows are going to hurt. Looking for progress. It's her and the walls—built together as a complete set. Buy one get the other half off—an *everything-must-go* closeout sale on mental health and wellness.

"You told me I could write about it, talking is...it's hard. The words get stuck in my throat."

"I'd like you to try, Avery. Could you do that for me?"

Silence, like stillness, can be felt as the absence of something. There is a difference in the silence of nothingness and the silence of someone being quiet. A pressure you feel behind your eyes while your other senses strain to warn you of danger. That's what I'm feeling...the pressure of enclosing danger. I can feel my heartbeat racing, and I want to leave.

"I, I wake up. That's all. I wake up before my alarm and I go to work."

And I leave her there. Alone.
For hours...
God the smell...
Forgive me.

Lies taste like broken promises, like unread love letters, and unanswered questions. When I lie about you, something profound inside me breaks. I leave a sliver of my heart in bed with you between those sheets. The therapist isn't responding. She looks at me with detached glass eyes that I can't meet. This robot knows the weight of my words and can feel what I'm holding back. I have to give her something...or she won't stop.

"And what about the girl? You wake up and Anna...?"

I wince. Your name doesn't belong on the lips of an unfeeling being. Not when you were so full of life. Not when she doesn't care. "And she—"

"Anna."

"She...Anna... doesn't."

The steady *click click click* of a little wall clock fills the would-be silence. My palms feel sweaty...but it would be rude to wipe them on the couch. Even if it belongs to a robot.

"Avery. Who was Anna to you?"

The whole world takes a breath and holds it; all at once, I feel it. The world held that breath until their lungs strained against

the will of every tree that gave them that breath to hold. They hold their breath until they can't stand the pain a moment longer...and then a second more. That breath of fresh air turns toxic and rages inside the bodies of every single living being and still, the world can't understand the pain I feel thinking of you. Who *was* Anna to me?

God, I hate thinking of you in the past tense.

"Avery?"

Sunrise or sunset?

"She's my everything."

The robot lets me leave when the timer beeps. I know she doesn't leave any buffer room between clients; I guess she's not big on goodbyes. She tells me I made good progress today, and she'll see me next week. I can't help but wonder what progress we made when it still curdles my heart to say your name. But...I *did* say your name. So maybe she's right. The thought makes me sick. My days all look the same now. Faded to a muddy grey. I don't sleep in our bed anymore. Too many memories.

—

Dear Anna,

Have you ever been numb to the world? Not...numb the way your mouth is numb after the dentist and you can only eat soup and pudding cups. But really...really numb. When you turn into the shadow of a shadow of a person and no one sees you the same? I wonder if that's what you felt towards the end. I hold onto those quiet hour questions with a new understanding and reverence. When I think back on that night, am I really remembering the need in your eyes?

"Do you prefer sunrise or sunset?"

Why would you ask me that? You placed the weight of the world on my lips and expected me to know the worth of what I held. If I had known what I gambled back then... known what you felt curled up beside me...I'd have read you poetry.

Ask me again.

If you asked me again...I'd tell you catching moonlight would require a huge ladder...one made for giants. That we would need a boat of stardust and oars forged from hope to float close enough to scoop up the gentle light of the moon. That its sickly sweet syrup would be the color of lilac and taste like dreams.

Ask me again.

If you asked me again...I'd tell you of course I'd love you if you were a worm. That I'd make you a little home full of plants and soft dirt. I'd feed you all the yummy things worms can eat. I'd watch your body wiggle in delight as you dug into your dark and quiet home...knowing I would keep you safe.

Ask me again.

Ask me again and I will tell you I only love the sunrise when you wake me with a smile.

I only want the sunsets where you're by my side. Just ask me...

Dear Anna,

These letters hurt. But the robot tells me I have to tell someone what I'm feeling, or it'll eat me alive. As time goes on, I can feel myself forgetting things about you...and I don't want to. No one deserves the pain of forgetting your laugh or your crooked chipped-toothed smile. Not even me. So, I'll write down everything I can remember, while I can remember, so I'll always remember little parts of you.

"Do you prefer sunrise or sunset?"

Ask me in the morning?

Boy on Fire

Peyton Bray

Out of the Past

Garrett E. Penland

In a cold and dark mist of post-morning rush pre-nightfall barfly takeover, just on the precipice of peace, in the lunchtime daze of needing to eat before returning to cubicle-coffin-land, Bill Brownboot covers his chest with his double pleated jacket and slips into the noodle shop like how a mailman shoves a letter into the opening in the door. Clunky but precise, hurried.

Billy sits down at the shop and is quickly hurried a menu and a glass of water. "Shit," he whispers to himself, believing he left his premium Tibetan menthol bidis in some other evening's coat pocket, before landing fingers to box, fingers to small white long tobacco herb paper dumpling, dumpling to mouth, potassium chlorate Pop fshhhh! "Ahhhhhh."

Speaking of dumplings, Billy orders the favorite dish of all young Shanghai school children, soup dumplings. He sits there in his smokey gauze of false mysterium. (Go up to the guy and he'll tell you every single thing he's done the past three hours.) His lonely glare scanning the other corporate ghosts appear and disappear behind cars, monuments, empty purple tourist buses planning their next great gag.

A Sapporo premium beer truck (driven by none other than Brownboot's own brother-in-law Takamura Hanabi) passes his field of view on its route to all the little Japanese restaurants in town (This here is a Chinese Restaurant, so no awkward side glances of knowing for you!) just as the warm dumpling pops its still-too-hot pork broth down the gullet of poor, now hacking Billy. Desperately grabbing for water, his eyes were just fixed in the same position of where the truck was, not still finding anything interesting just out of the necessity of dealing with bigger, more scalding problems.

He catches his breath when he notices where the truck was; a man is now there enveloped in the gray haze of the street. Almost as soon as the synapses fire in Bill that say, "Hey, there's a man there!" he begins walking toward Bill's current soy sauce castle, as he is the only patron (along with a waiter) on their lunch break in the back peeking their head out from time to time to look for any new customers.

Bill pretends not to notice the black-clad man as he clacks over in cowboy boots and swings open the door to the establishment, but this becomes significantly harder when, as Bill puts a big glob of sticky rice into his cheek like chewing tobacco, the man sits, clanging with chains and metal buckles and buttons, right across Bill at his little table used for couples and loners. Bill stares wide-eyed with rice dribbling off his lip, as the man takes off his black hat and leans back into the red leather chair.

Bill knows this man, not in the way of familial gatherings and long-lost cousins, but in some strange way where he felt that the man looked off, he needed to be monochrome, silver, and black. The man, in his early fifties with slicked-back black hair, clears his throat, a guttural phlegm-filled hack of old cigarette tar and illicit drugs of years passed. "You know who I am, look closer and see for yourself," the man said, "look closer" being a reference to how Bill has not made any sort of eye contact this entire time. He slowly raises his head, like a dog who knows something's wrong.

"By god! You're Robert Mitchum!" he exclaims, shooting a fleck of rice directly onto the black cotton coat, almost in the spot where a nametag would be.

"Yes, I am." He nods and flicks the rice, and it sticks onto the wall. "And as you may realiz-"

"You're supposed to be dead!"

"Now let me finish, boy. Yes, I am a ghost, a phantasm, *El espiritu*. You see now, boy, I have found myself back in the land of the living on a kind of leave. In grade school, the principal green-

lights a field trip to go on some educational journey; Grim Reaper works the same. I've come to you specifically because I need to know something from you, and you being a fan of my work leads me to believe you were my best bet."

Bill's poor dumplings are shot from his direct consciousness; all he has is questions and more questions and fear and desire, and mainly fear. "W-why me, sir?" his first, anticlimactic words to the late and great.

"Well, I know you have something very powerful to us here in the spirit world, son—nostalgia. You watched me in *Thunder Road* and *Night of the Hunter* with your grandfather when you were a kid, shooo, boy, that was a sight seeing your wide eyes watch me get after them kids your age. Old Mr. Brownboot sure had a laugh watching you dumbfounded at my evilness and suave attitude while being so. Later in your life, too, you enjoyed *Dead Man*, one of my last pictures in your teenage years, smokin' reefer with your high school buds. I hold no judgment; that movie was weird, and you lose certain feelings of indignation once you pass over the veil. I understand you have always held a special spot in your mind for me as I remind you of those evenings with Grandad after school and before responsibilities."

Bill remembers those vignettes pulled out from the swamp of forgetfulness, but this still doesn't answer anything for him. "Nostalgia? What does that do for ghosts?"

"We eat it...It keeps us in the minds and memories of people long preceding, and into the afterlife, we need that so as to not be forgotten."

"Eat it?"

"Yes. Listen, don't bother yourself with the logistics; you'll learn it all in due time. You see, I'm running out. See us ghosts of old actors and figures of early radio and cinema are being replaced every day. Them bastards at the *Criterion Collection* haven't put out enough movies to the snobs that don't have the rights!" He chuckles.

"Whatever remains of my dormant estate, phasing me out as only generational wealth, my great grandkids don't even understand where from. At this point in the great unknown castle a new famous person gets killed in some tragic way, some old man or woman fades into the mist. I'm tired of the fear, the uncertainty of my own image. An' I'm in the line for it. I still gotta ways to it, but it's better to work this out now rather than when my head's on the stone."

"What is the afterlife like?"

"Shut your damn mouth, boy, I'm telling you something important." There is silence.

"I can't answer those questions, against policy." He says with his head a little lowered.

"I need you to show your future kids my movies, scare them with Harry Powell's *Love and Hate*, show them my Westerns with dusty gunfights and my earlier noir endeavors—though I never liked playing a private dick. Show them my movies so that I may live longer in the minds of this here beautiful kingdom of the living. Please, son, I'm beggin' you."

What was once an imposing figure to Bill has been reduced, physically morphing to a bent over, gray-haired wrinkly old man, looking with sad brown eyes, dark as coals, full of sorrow. Bill remembers his grandpa and the Westerns of old, stories he told of the great Robert Mitchum himself shooting a movie in his hometown; he never realized how tied together these things are, how symbiotic.

"I guess," he squeaks out, still filled to the brim with questions and unknowing.

"Thank you, son!"

He shoots back to his younger self, with dark evil hair, and clothes, puts on his hat, and shoots up out of the chair. As he clanks his way out of the restaurant, he turns back halfway out the door to look at Bill and say, "You'll be rewarded for this come time your eyes shut for the last time and you squeak out your last pitiful word!"

He bellows almost too gleefully. He walks out to the road, checks his watch, and looks around as if waiting for something, before noticing Bill's agape mouth and pearl eyes still staring shell-shocked at him. He waves and tips his hat, as Takamura comes right on time around the block, and Poof! Mitchum is no more.

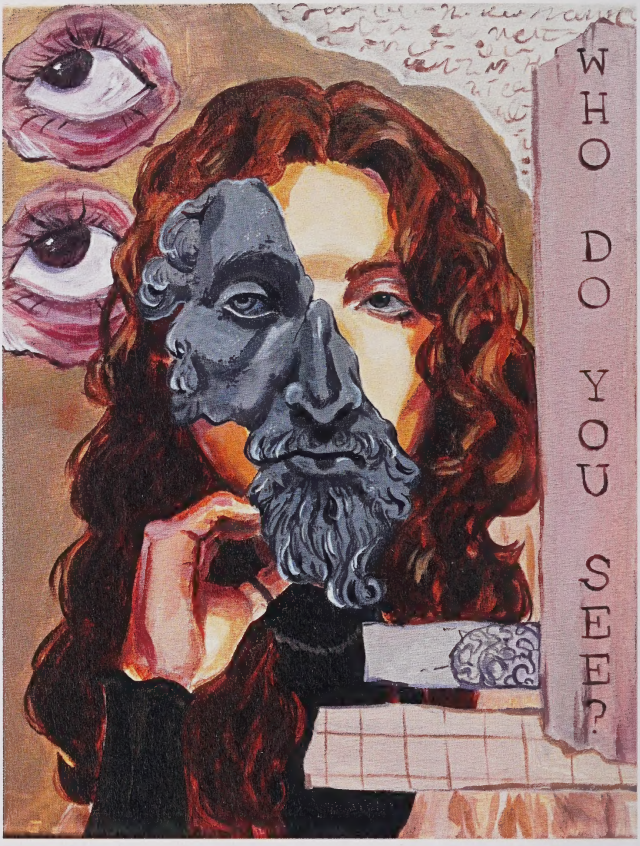
Brownboot's soup dumplings are now cold, but he still finds them delicious as he thoughtlessly consumes the remaining few. He pays and stands up into another thoughtless afternoon.

Under a Full Moon

Harley Burns

Who Do You See?

Ronnie Z. Nielsen



Carpet Farming

Hannah Shabaan

CONTENT WARNING: On-stage: addiction, drug use. Off-stage: domestic violence, rape, suicide.

CHARACTERS

LOUISE, early twenties, mother, addict. Avoiding grieving by using. Lying to herself about how bad it is. Trying to quit, knowing she can't, knowing she needs to ask for help, and refusing. Eight months into addiction.

ALICIA, early twenties, mother, addict. Fresh out of a five-year long abusive relationship, with no support or resources, a bad childhood and two kids. Also trying to quit but failing because she doesn't have anyone to ask for help. Two months into addiction.

SETTING

Condominium unit in the South. Stage has three sets, separated by walls. On the left, a bedroom, with only a bed. In the middle, another bedroom. A small bed and toys neatly in toy boxes. Dinosaur and Pokémon stickers cover the walls. On the right, a living room/kitchen. Both are messy. Countertops are covered with mail, jewelry, and legos. The sink is full of dishes. The living room is more organized but cluttered. Full laundry baskets, stray stacks of books, an empty toy box surrounded by dinosaurs, and a coffee table covered in empty and half-filled cups.

TIME

Three a.m. End of September.

(Curtains open. On the left, the first bedroom is lit up by red light. LOUISE tosses and turns in the bed. In the middle, the second bedroom is lit by a shifting blue light, creating the sense of being underwater. A small figure lays peacefully in a small bed. On the right, a light above the stove gives the audience a faint view of

the mess. After two minutes of LOUISE tossing and turning in bed, she gets up. She drags her hands over her face before she climbs out of bed. She is nude and shivering. She pulls on a large black t-shirt and underwear. She pantomimes opening her bedroom door and shutting it. She walks to the blue bedroom. She pantomimes opening the bedroom door and enters. She kneels and kisses the figure in bed. The figure shifts. LOUISE stands, exits the bedroom and pantomimes carefully shutting the bedroom door. Then, LOUISE walks to the kitchen. She stands and stares at the cupboard above the fridge. She shakes her head and grabs a bottle of Benadryl off of the counter. She shakes out two, swallowing them without water, grabs a book from a stack, turns on lamp by the couch, and sits down to read. LOUISE fidgets and cannot sit still. She sits in different positions on the couch, even with her head hanging off of it. She gets up and paces, holding the book. She has not turned a single page. She shuts the book and slams it on the couch three times. Only a soft thumping sound can be heard. LOUISE looks at the cupboard above the fridge again. She drops the book and starts to walk back towards the kitchen before stopping and shaking her head. She grabs her phone charging on the kitchen counter before returning to the couch. She scrolls for thirty seconds before abruptly dropping her phone and almost running to the kitchen. She frantically opens the cupboard above the fridge and grabs a small, ornate box. LOUISE brings the box to the living room, opening it on the way. Carefully, she removes the contents: a tray, a small mint tin, a gift card, and a straw. LOUISE opens the mint tin and dumps a single pill on the tray. She proceeds to crush the pill with the card, create two lines and snorts one in each nostril. This happens in less than two minutes. She sighs and sits up, leaning back on the couch. LOUISE is visibly relaxed, a marked change from her earlier fidgeting. She stares into the audience, eyes slowly shutting and her head drooping to the side. She jerks her head up and tries to open her eyes.)

LOUISE: *(Slurring.)* When I was a child, I had recurring

dreams.

(Nods off, and then jerks her head up.)

And although they differed in small ways, they all had the same theme. I'm in an enclosed space, trapped with an object that should be small.

(Nods off again, and then shakes her head, trying to wake herself. She is still slurring.)

It's a penny, or a pebble, but it's colossal. It grows in size, just as my panic swells. My loved ones are beneath it, and my cells scream with alarm bells.

The doorbell rings, followed by a fast, hard knocking on the front door. A light now shines on ALICIA, standing outside the front door in the kitchen. ALICIA is fidgeting, much worse than LOUISE. She alternates between bouncing on her toes and pacing in front of the door. LOUISE immediately sits up, eyes opened wide, goes to the door and looks out the peephole. Quietly, she rushes back to the living room, putting everything back into the box. She goes to put it back in the cupboard above the fridge, stops, and puts it in the drawer under the stove. ALICIA knocks again. LOUISE opens the door, and ALICIA enters.

LOUISE: Alicia, it's three in the morning. *(Scratches her arm.)* Where are the boys?

(ALICIA'S eyes scan the kitchen countertop. She ignores LOUISE'S question.)

ALICIA: I'm hurting. My whole body aches. I can't sleep.

LOUISE: *(Sighs.)* How long has it been?

ALICIA: Four days. Do you have any? Please, tell me you do. Please, I only need a little bit. Half a pill, or a quarter. Please, I'll pay you—

LOUISE: I just did my last one. *(Scratches her head with both hands, scraping her scalp with her nails.)* I'm sorry dude. But four days? Go to the clinic, it's out of your system, now you can—

ALICIA: If I go, they'll take the boys. I can do this, I can

quit, I just need a lil bit.

(ALICIA begins to move items on the counter, searching for stray blue crumbs. Not finding any, she moves to the living room and flips a switch, turning on the overhead light [stage lights brighten the room]. She prowls to the coffee table, gets on her knees, and scans the surface for crumbs. ALICIA pulls a card out of her pocket and begins scrapping blue crumbs, dust, and debris into a line. The dust and debris make up the majority of the line.)

LOUISE: Yeah. The boys. *(Scratches her breasts and then her nipples. So itchy.)* Where are they?

ALICIA: Andrew has them.

LOUISE: Andrew?

(ALICIA ignores her again. She gets on her hands and knees, leans forward, and begins meticulously scanning the carpet.)

LOUISE: How long has he had them? Fuck, he's not giving them back; you know that right?

(A cry sounds from the middle bedroom. The figure in the blue room is moving, a child having a bad dream. ALICIA is plucking crumbs and tiny chunks of broken pills from the carpet—carpet farming. She holds them in the cupped hand she's using to carpet farm. She is either ignoring LOUISE on purpose or so fully focused on her search, she can't hear her. The cry sounds again. LOUISE grabs an applesauce pouch from the cupboard and moves to the middle bedroom. LOUISE pantomimes opening the door. The child sits up, rubs their eyes, and reaches out towards LOUISE. She hands the child the pouch and strokes their hair before kissing the top of their head. At the same time, as soon as LOUISE is out of view, ALICIA stops carpet farming. She stealthily moves to the kitchen and carefully opens the cupboard above the fridge. Finding nothing, she carefully shuts the cupboard, just as the child hands the applesauce pouch back to LOUISE. LOUISE leaves the bedroom and reenters the kitchen/living room. ALICIA makes it back to the spot she was in just in time, resuming her search. LOUISE scrapes her nails over

her face, scratching her nose and forehead, before moving to scratch her head again. She stares down at ALICIA.)

LOUISE: How long has he had the boys?

ALICIA: Four days. *(Stands, depositing her precious crop. The pill crumbs now make up most of the line. A bountiful harvest.)*

LOUISE: *(Shaking her head.)* He beat you, starved you, and fucking raped you for three years. *(Shoves her hand into her pants and scratches her crotch.)* How do you think he's going to treat the boys?

ALICIA: You don't get to judge me. You're in the same position as me. *(She plucks out the dust and debris, crushes the line with her card, pulls a one-dollar bill from her pocket and rolls it up.)* Actually, you're worse. On the outside, you seem to have it all together. You hide it all so well and present this perfect little life to everyone, but it's all a fucking lie. *(Leans forward with the rolled bill to her nose, one finger on her other nostril, she snorts the line and sighs.)* A lie you believe. I know I'm a piece of shit dopehead. I fucking own it. But you? *(Laughs as her body slowly relaxes, she rolls her shoulders back before scratching her arms.)* You think you're better than me, but you're a piece of shit dopehead, too.

LOUISE: *(Stunned. She sits back down on the couch, pulling her legs to her chest, making herself small.)* I'm doing my best. *(She whispers, voice barely audible.)*

ALICIA: No, you aren't. You checked out when your mom died. *(Gets to her feet and stands over Louise, arms crossed.)* You were doing your best...

LOUISE: Stop... *(Whispered after "your mom died.")*

ALICIA: But something happened, I don't know what, and you've spiraled, dude. Fuck, you're the one who introduced me to this shit. Look at the house! Look at how you're living! *(Uncrosses her arms to gesture to the living room and kitchen. She scratches the side of her thigh.)*

LOUISE: Stop... *(Whispered after "this shit.")*

ALICIA: Do you think she would want this? You're killing yourself. Just like her. Slower than her, but what happens when you nod off and don't wake up, and if you have Jason with you, then wh—

LOUISE: *(Screaming.)* Stop! Stop! You wanna know what happened? We read mom's letter. *(Begins crying.)* And she gave me a shoutout. *(Bitter laugh choked out.)* It was a list of reasons, and I was at the top of that list. She fucking blamed me. *(Sobbing. Voice drops to a shaky whisper. She begins rocking back and forth.)* She blamed me. She blamed me. She blamed me. She blamed me. She blamed me.

(ALICIA sits next to LOUISE and wraps her arm around her. The stage lights fade as a spotlight is set on the pair. LOUISE continues her whispered chant as she continues rocking. After a few moments, she stops repeating "She blamed me" to take deep breaths. She shakes off ALICIA'S arm. ALICIA scoots down the couch, giving LOUISE space. LOUISE uncurls herself and leans forward, staring straight into the audience, eyes unfocused and disconnected. Although her eyes are open, she sees nothing.)

LOUISE: I don't know how to live with this. I don't know where to put it. I don't know where to set it down or fit it in. I don't.... *(Pause. Closes eyes, inhales a breath, holds it, and releases it in a sigh.)* All I know is that she is gone, and I hurt. *(Chokes at "hurt." Pauses to take another deep breath.)* I hurt, and I miss her, and I'm so heavy. She's everywhere I go; I see her in everything. I know I'm a piece of shit. And I know if I don't get my shit together, I'll end up just like her.

ALICIA: I'm sorry, dude—

LOUISE: *(Interrupts her.)* I need you to leave. Now.

ALICIA: *(Stunned.)* What?

LOUISE: Get out. Don't come here again. Don't text me. Leave me alone.

ALICIA: I said I'm sorry, not just about your mom but also what I said—

LOUISE: *(Speaking over ALICIA.)* If you don't get out right now, I will call the cops. Get out, Alicia! Go! Leave!

(ALICIA stares at LOUISE. Silence. Then she stands and exits, leaving LOUISE alone on stage again. The spotlight is back on LOUISE. She stands and looks out into the audience.)

LOUISE: When I was a child, I had recurring dreams. And although they differed in small ways, they all had the same theme. I'm in an enclosed space, trapped with an object that should be small. It's a penny, or a pebble, but it's colossal. It grows in size, just as my panic swells. My loved ones are beneath it, and my cells scream with alarm bells.

(LOUISE'S phone rings. She sits down, grabs her phone, and holds it to her ear.)

Hey... It's late. Are you okay?... Good... I'm glad you called... I need your help.

(Spotlight dims, curtains close.)

Crystal Mind

Sydney Elizabeth Helmich

Blood Meets Silk

Jasmine Gabrielle Willett

All Mallory ever wanted was to be exceptional, and she reminded herself of this desire as she climbed the many flights of stairs that led to her future. The studio was on the top floor of a building with no working elevator, which made waking up at five a.m. for design class even more strenuous. The pale grey concrete walls surrounded her on all sides, windowless and bare. At the top of each flight hung a dizzying white bulb to illuminate the otherwise dank staircase. The only other sound that accompanied Mallory's labored breathing was the constant fluttering of moths that clustered together around the fluorescent light sources. Her grip on the iron handrail began to slip as her palms grew slick with sweat. *You asked for this*, she told herself between breaths, *you need this*. Ms. Markov had looked her up and down on the first day of class, scoffed with indifference, and hadn't said a word to her since. *She will notice me soon enough*, she thought as she clutched the white silk of her project that she had lost sleep over, woken up late over, *this is all you've ever wanted*. Today was the final day to be considered for the Markov Muse fashion show, where only one student from her entire graduating class would be allowed to showcase their own original design among several other infamous designer's on a notorious runway. Ms. Markov had made it very clear to her and the rest of her competition that no design shall be considered if it is late coming through the door, which made Mallory's legs climb faster. Six minutes and sixteen flights of stairs stood between her and her chance. Halfway through the seventh flight she heard movement from above, too close to be from the studio. Aside from her classmates, there were never other students or interns there at such an early hour.

The sound of feet shuffling was paired with a pained feminine groan which made Mallory's pulse jump with alarm. There was a man's voice too, low and distressed, as he frantically whispered something inaudible. Mallory continued to advance the steps, the silk in her hands damp with sweat. Something felt distinctly wrong. Her thoughts began to swim as she heard the voice of the woman, light yet demanding, speaking the language of a tongue Mallory had never heard before. The strange words flowed together despite the sharp edges of her dictation, lulling Mallory into a frozen sate of fearful anticipation.

"NO!" The desperate shout from the man was followed by more shuffling of feet and groans, both feminine and masculine.

Mallory rounded the corner to find the two figures grappling with each other at the top of the flight before her, their bodies a fevered blur of motion as her head continued to throb. The man had both of the woman's shoulders gripped in his hands as he tried to force her biting teeth away from his veiny neck, her black Converse screeching as she was pushed towards the edge of the step. Before Mallory could think of something to say, before the woman could finish her chant, a guttural sound of rage escaped from the man as he shoved her lean body with all his might. Only within that split second before impact did the woman and Mallory lock horrified eyes. The woman crumpled as she fell, her head cracking against the steel steps like a carton of eggs placed in the wrong grocery bag. Mallory heard the sound of bones snapping and choked on a breath. The woman's limbs twisted in odd ways, and animalistic sounds clawed their way out from her beaten-in mouth. As her body rolled to a halt at Mallory's feet, all went still. She had a head full of fiery red hair that now clumped together with gore. Blood coated the steps, and, from the top of them, the man met her stare with wild eyes. He was starkly pale with scarce strands of blonde hair protruding from a swollen scalp, as if he had been ripping it out himself. His cracked lips parted, but no words followed. He looked to be in

a complete state of petrified shock. Mallory's expression mirrored the same terror but of a different kind. She hadn't realized she'd been taking steps backwards until her back met the frigid wall of stone behind her. The stranger then walked down the same steps he had just murdered on, not bothering to step over the gore. He didn't meet her eyes again as he rounded the same corner she came out from, leaving a trail of bloody shoe prints in his wake.

Mallory looked at the woman and then looked at her watch. Two minutes and eight flights of stairs left. Her eyes clouded with cold tears until the gruesome scene before her was only a blur of red. *This can't be real*, she told herself. A state of shock settled over her body; it stilled her nerves and deluded her thoughts. *Why me?* The thought was one of few that came to her mind in words. She believed it to be a mistake of fate. Anyone could have walked into the scene as she did, maybe she could wait for someone else to report it. *Think, think, think*, she urged herself. The textiles class on the tenth floor began in two hours, thirty minutes before her class ended. Someone, maybe the instructor, would come across the scene and report it in her place. Bloody spittle dripped from the woman's lower jaw, in the place where four of her bottom teeth should have been. With the way her jaw was placed in correlation to her disfigured mouth, the woman almost looked to be smiling. Mallory came to a decision. She would not allow herself to panic; it would not resurrect the corpse before her. She put one foot in front of the other and ascended the steps. Careful not to leave a trace of shoeprints as the man did, Mallory avoided the scattered spurts of blood where the woman's skull had caved. She let her ambition chase her up the stairs until sweat rhythmically dripped from the tip of her nose onto concrete. The ache in her skull relentlessly intensified as she ascended, but she did not give in to exhaustion for a second. she heard the clamor of excitement coming from the studio above her and bounded up the stairs with unnatural adrenaline. It was as if a thousand fists were banging on the hard concrete walls around her, in tandem

with the beat of her own thundering pulse. There were no thoughts racing through Mallory's mind, no questioning of her own moral or instinctual desires. Her mind was an empty shell that drove her up stacks of steps with the grace of a rabid animal. As she reached the final step and saw the open door of the classroom, the dissonance in her soul became unbearable. The ringing in her ears made her want to chop them off hastily; it was of no sound she had ever heard before. A scream of turmoil was cut short as she entered the enclosure of the studio, and all noise ceased. The ache in her head transferred to her heart, where it would become dull and heavy with time.

No one spoke a word to her, but everyone stopped to stare. The air felt crispier in the studio, the smell of perfume and pen ink pungent. Mallory avoided the watchful eyes and found her designated workplace in the far corner of the room. Before she knew it, she heard the *click, click, click* of Ms. Markov's Brunello Cucinelli heels cross the length of the studio and stop in front of her.

"It's a downright shame you were able to steal this opportunity right from under the noses of the girls who actually deserve to be here. Girls would kill to be here, and yet you see no problem showing up at the last-minute and... disgustingly disheveled."

Her classmates didn't bother to muffle their sneering laughs at Mallory's humiliation.

"Hand over that crumpled mess, and let's get this over with. The decision really won't be difficult this year, some of your classmates are *truly* gifted."

Mallory wasn't fazed by the cruelty; she had been enduring the hateful looks and petty sabotage from her peers since the first week of class when Ms. Markov made it clear that she was not at the same degree of class as the others. The university's fashion program was one of the most prestigious and exclusive programs in the country, not to mention the most expensive. It didn't matter to Ms. Markov or the other students that Mallory had beat out thousands of applicants; it only mattered that she was homely and off-putting,

the unforgiving stain on their Miu Miu knit sweaters. Only this time, things were different; she was different. She had dedicated money she could not afford to spend and countless nights of unrest to finishing the construction of the gown, like a single mother birthing a child she had no means to support but would anyway. She was proud of this extension of her. *This is your chance.* She did not leave a dead woman's corpse in the stairwell for nothing. Mallory began to unfold the garment in her hands but froze when she caught a terrifying glimpse of something dark and red on the perfectly white silk. *Is that...* before she could muster an excuse for her retraction, the silk was ripped from her hands in annoyed haste.

"Oh, it's far too late to cower in embarrassment now, Mallory. The fashion industry does not allow for..." Her jab died in her wrinkly throat.

She held the long silk gown before her and exhaled a strangled breath. From where Mallory was sitting, she could only see the expression of pure bewildering awe glowing from Ms. Markov's face. The heavy silence that filed the room was almost more terrorizing than the hellish cacophony that reverberated throughout the stairwell. Something was very wrong. As Ms. Markov struggled for words, a crowd gathered around her and peered in at her design with captivating interest.

"This is like nothing I've ever laid eyes on..." she breathed.

Mallory carefully made her way to stand with Ms. Markov and felt her entire body go still as she then saw what attracted a great interest.

Blood. Dark red strokes of blood intricately weaved in and out of each other on the silk, forming shapes and patterns she could have never imagined on her own. A spiral of interconnected strokes decorated the white silk with careful detail, each shape particularly unique. The red of the blood seemed to glimmer in the fluorescent light of the studio as if still wet. Mallory reached a trembling hand out to test the unblemished pattern and to her own horror, felt

nothing but the smooth kiss of silk. *Impossible*, she thought. Nausea flooded her senses and made her limbs shake feverishly. This was no accidental spray of blood. This was intentional. *But how?* Mallory questioned. *Blood was everywhere, so a small splatter or spray might be understandable, but this?* The longer she stared at the fabric, the more it looked like a demonic mural. Ms. Markov and her classmates seemed to think the pattern was made with fabric paint instead of gore, which should have been a relief to Mallory. Instead, it deeply bothered her like an unreachable itch. She would never be able to explain to anyone that this was not of her work, and that the gown was deserving of their enthusiasm without the unexplainable design. Mallory suddenly felt incredibly saddened; the gown she had dedicated her well being to was ruined and overshadowed by this evil.

The rest of the class period passed by in a hollow blur. Ms. Markov declared Mallory to be the lucky participant for her fashion show and spent the rest of class applauding her work in a way that was so unlike her usual disdain. Her teacher's eyes were glassy; she seemed giddy, as if she couldn't stop smiling. The praise that would have meant the world to Mallory less than an hour ago now repulsed her. *This is what you've dreamed of. Smile and take pride in knowing you've succeeded*, she urged herself silently. However, the dress wasn't the only anxiety clawing against the walls of Mallory's conscience. She kept anticipating the sound of police sirens getting closer from the distance, but they never came. One of the textiles students should have come across the body by now, but no screams for help were ever made. She must have missed Ms. Markov's word of dismissal because half the class had already exited the room by the time Mallory realized. She quickly collected her materials and attempted to flee, but her path was swiftly blocked by Ms. Markov's hauntingly gleeful face.

"I just wanted to once again congratulate you, Mallory. I am *truly* inspired by what you have managed to configure. I simply

cannot *wait* to see your creation up on the runway."

A small smile was all Mallory could manage before escaping. She knew then that the vessel who was just speaking to her was not her teacher, not *really*. The rest of her class was far ahead of her and would be coming across the woman's corpse soon.

Several flights of stairs later, Mallory began to panic. She had been preparing herself for the smell. She inhaled a long heavy breath before turning the corner on the floor where she witnessed the killing, her steps light and her skin sticky with sweat. There was no one else in the stairwell to hear the sob that left her as Mallory looked upon the spotless grey steps where just a couple hours ago, she had witnessed a woman's violent death. Her eyes frantically searched for the man's bloody footprints, but there were none. She tried to convince herself that maybe she was on the wrong floor, but she knew she would find no trace of the woman even as she ascended the rest of the flights in search. *Am I insane? Am I deluded?* She began to beg God for answers she would not receive. The white silk in her hands felt heavier by the second; she wanted to be relieved of the burden of carrying it. As she reached the ground floor of the building, Mallory stooped to the ground and began to weep as she cradled herself in her own arms, rocking back and forth.

"Why is this happening to me?" she asked aloud. "What crime could I have committed to be worthy of this punishment?"

Snot poured from her nose and her eyebrows twitched violently. Whether it was God, herself, or the universe, it did not matter who she was questioning, only that she received nothing but still air in answer. Mallory cried until she had no more tears left to exalt and then gathered herself and the cursed gown before walking home.

For the following seven days, Mallory locked herself in her frigid apartment and mourned the loss of her sanity. Scissors, measuring tools, old bottles of gin, and excess silk littered the floor. For the first three nights, she had terrifying nightmares where she relived the murder in the stairwell. Sometimes she was herself, some-

times the woman, but often, she was the man. On the fourth night, her fear of having the dream again kept her from falling asleep. Instead, she paced the cold checkered tile of the kitchen floor and ignored Ms. Markov's attempts at reaching her. The truth is, she wanted more than anything to attend the show; it was what made her move to this godless city in the first place. But as much as she desired to attend, she couldn't shake the undeniable feeling that something horrible would happen if she did. On her seventh night of solitude, Mallory drew a cold bath to ward off the fever she was coming down with. Her cheeks were stained bright red, and her lips cracked till she tasted the coppery tang of blood. Her body quivered in the frigid water, but she knew it would deescalate her fever as well as keep her awake. Mallory stretched a long pale arm out for her essential oil bag, intending to add some rosemary to the water. She did not bother to look, for she knew the curves and edges of the bottle by memory. Her fingers grazed something coarse and paused. She hastily yanked the unknown object out of the bag and then immediately dropped it upon realization of what she now possessed — teeth. Four pearly white teeth strung together with red thread. Only, upon closer inspection, it was not thread but hair. Mallory would remember that shade of red anywhere, for it relentlessly haunted her dreams. She did not bother to question how the relic could have appeared in her possession; she knew it would be of no use. Images of the woman's bloody caved in mouth flashed through her head and sent her body into convulsion. The water began to burn as hot as her skin. Mallory's body quaked with sobs that were more like screams. Steam filled the room and fogged her vision, the water now furiously boiling around her. Bubbles erupted under the surface and scorched her skin. Her wails of misery were now tinged with pain as she let her naked body fall from the side of the tub and onto the ice-cold floor. The polarity of temperature somehow soothed the nerves in her limbs and ceased their trembling, but nothing could call off the war that raged within her mind. Too exhausted to collect

herself, Mallory folded herself into a ball on the bathroom floor and softly cried to herself before drifting off into a dreamless sleep.

Mallory awoke rageful. Lulled into sleeping on the bathroom floor, her spine ached, and her head throbbed. A part of her old self, the part that would fight with tooth and nail to get what she wanted, awoke that morning too. She was too proud to truly believe her mind was lost to an endless void; she believed she knew better. She determined that she was being haunted, that she was being intimidated out of her exceptionality. Her night was void of dreams, which caused her to sleep through the alarms that would have notified her of the show's beginning. She had not dared to touch the gown or even look at it since the day the pattern appeared, but with one glance in its direction she realized how badly she yearned to put an end to it. Once she handed it over to the show's proceedings, she would leave and never have to look upon it and be reminded of what she had done in the stairwell again. *It was not your doing*, she tried to remind herself, but it never fully dimmed the dull ache in her chest.

The building was intimidating to look up at, and the pulsing beat of the music vibrating from its walls matched the tempo of Mallory's heart. The show had already started, but Mallory was scheduled for the finale. She shoved her way through the crowds of towering models backstage, their faces painted white with excessively long artificial eyelashes glued to doll-like eyes. She thought she caught glimpses of a few of the designers she had been worshiping for years, but her mind was too focused on the task at hand to introduce herself. She had placed the silk gown in a plastic dry-cleaning bag to not wrinkle it; the pink light of the stage reflected against the plastic and illuminated Mallory's wild eyes.

"Mallory! My God child we thought you would never show!" Ms. Markov's voice boomed from across the room. Mallory reached her within a few strides, breathing hard with anticipation.

"Bad news. Your model seems to have disappeared com-

pletely. We've tried every way to reach her, much like we did with you, but no answer."

Dread found its home in her stomach; she should have known the responsibility of the cursed gown could not be passed to another so easily. Ms. Markov shuffled through the laminated portfolios in her arms.

"It's a shame, she would have fit in perfectly with the atmosphere of your creation, just *look* at that hair!"

With a swift movement, she pulled out the headshot she was searching for and shoved it into Mallory's hands. The face that stared back at her found her in the darkest corner of her mind and had not let go for what felt like years. The woman was undoubtedly striking with life in her eyes. *What if she's still... no.* Mallory saw the life leave her firsthand. There wasn't a possibility. She was either losing her mind or was being haunted. She did not know which option was more desirable.

"On account of this unfortunate turn of events... I have come up with a solution. You will present your design yourself!"

She continued talking, but her words had no sound. Mallory didn't object, didn't cry, nor did she breathe as the makeup artists painted her face with the same glowing white that decorated the complexions of the models around her. Being poked and prodded at wasn't new to her, for she had been experimented on for the past seven days. She was then stripped down to her undergarments in the middle of the room like any of the other models had. Where she expected to find burns and peeling skin from the boiling bath, there were none. Ms. Markov stooped to Mallory's feet and helped her step into the silk gown with a stupidly awe filled expression. Of course, Mallory had used her own dimensions to alter the gown, so it fit her like a personalized manacle. She looked at herself in the full-length mirror behind her and gasped. The gown truly *was* breathtaking. They had painted her lips blood-red to match the hauntingly intricate pattern. Her dark hair was tied up in a tight knot on the back

of her head; they hadn't had time to undo the tedious mats that had formed over the past week. As Ms. Markov and her entourage cooed with admiration around her, Mallory blocked out their voices to focus on the gory design. She was able to easily lose herself in its complexity; the longer she looked the quieter the room became. Suddenly, as she traced the etchings of the pattern with her eyes, she began to hear a string of words delicately whispered in both ears. Guided by the voice, she followed the length of the pattern with her eyes as she listened, suddenly coming to a wicked realization. It's *a language.*

Before she could take in the deadly hint just passed to her, she was rushed to the right of the stage and fell in line behind three other models. She counted the breaths it took between each model's appearance on the runway and anticipated her own. Her last thought was of the bewildered man in the stairwell before the lights changed to blue and she advanced to center stage. Mallory had no idea what to expect. Upon viewing the gown, the crowd erupted. Mallory could see everything and nothing all at once as she walked, holding her arms out to the side as to fully present the gown. Screams of ecstasy were heard all around her; hands reached up from the crowd as if to touch her for only a second. Flashes of light from cameras burned her eyes, but she did not dare blink and miss a moment of this surrounding awe. *They love it—no, they love me.* People sobbed all around her, their hearts broken open with longing. The lights transformed to an electric purple, and people began stomping their feet against the wood floors, slamming their fists against the side of the stage to create an enveloping discordance of sound. Standing on the sidelines wasn't enough for them; they began to crawl on stage, clawing their ways over one another.

"You love me!" Mallory let tears from her own eyes fall, her arms stretched wide in embrace.

She was their souls, their consciences. The lights deepened to a startling red. She was everything. The men and women at her

feet began weeping into the folds of her gown. The thumping of fists grew and intensified. For once in her miserable life, Mallory felt whole. People piled on top of one another in an attempt to reach her, to touch the silk and feel redemption. She looked to her outstretched arm, and only then did she notice the bracelet of teeth adorning her right wrist. For a reason that should have been odd to her, she did not feel frightened. She began to notice the sharp sparks of pain that bloomed at her ankles, where she saw that some men and women were beginning to bite at her. The thundering of fists turned rabid. People began to pull on the silk till it ripped, stuffing the fabric in their salivating mouths. They fought over the scraps feverishly with their teeth and nails. Mallory felt trickles of blood pour from her legs and into the awaiting mouths of those at her feet. The piles of bodies enveloped her form, and arms pulled at her from every which way. Hands found their way into her hair and grabbed fistfuls. Mallory was immune to the pain and felt only bliss at being acknowledged. The never-ending flashes of bright light from cameras manipulated the scene, creating a strobe light effect that delayed visual movements and cut moments of time in half. She was now completely trapped and naked beneath the mound of sweaty bodies; only a triangle of vision was granted to her as her limbs were pulled from her body. In the shadows of the great room's corner, Mallory could make out only the face of a woman, beautiful and lively. The face of a ghost whom she knew all too well. The discord of pounding limbs was now paired with animalistic grunts and growls as her admirers began to eat her alive. The woman met Mallory's stare and flashed a meaningful smile. The ache in Mallory's heart finally began to subside as the life drained from her flesh. With her last ounce of pride, she looked to the demon and grinned.

Decay

Bam L. McDermott

Ghosts of Summertime

Clay N. Jones

That person I told you about came over the other day. You know I'm not the type to invite a bus stop stranger over to my house, but I've been frustrated. This winter has been unforgiving; I think my blood has frozen over, and no matter what I do, this grief is stuck to me in a way I can't shake. I've read probably thirty books about gods and ghosts now, but you can't learn how to swim by reading about water. They said they could get me in touch with the weirder side of the universe.

They came over, dusted my home with black salt, and began to read from a nameless book. I thought the action was about to start, but instead they gave me an interview.

"Did your family ever take vacations in the summer?"

"Where did y'all like to go?"

"What was the ocean like there?"

"What are you parents up to these days?"

My frustration metastasized into disappointment. The experience was not the sort of weird I've been reaching for.

Later that night I was laying on the couch, watching the snow fall, when a void appeared in my home. It was just a dark spot in reality, a shadow without a caster, a deep, floating stain. I didn't even have a full second to take it in before light sliced it in half, and the whole world split open with it. Out came a torrent of glowing saltwater, rushing over my head and filling the room to the ceiling. Transparent minnows swam between my fingers and sand castles manifested at my feet. It all had electric familiarity. My parents were watching from beach chairs far away, so painfully young; Dad with thick, chestnut hair and Mom with her old, easy smile. Sand dollars and ice cream cones and summer-green leaves took shape in

the water and dissolved again.

It was all over so quickly. The water passed through me and went on. I felt a little warmth in me, for the first time in a year, an ember glowing beneath my lungs. I could breathe again.

All Eyes on Me

Gracie Blue Craft

Golden Hour

Geneva A. Witherspoon

Even hours later, her parents' shouts still rang in her ears. She tried to block them out by humming, but it was pointless. Like a bad song on repeat, it only got worse. *Why do they* still *get to yell at me? Don't tell me again, Dad! I'm gone, Mom! You can stop now.*

She came to a bus stop. A scruffy man was lying on the bench, taking up the whole thing, but it didn't matter. She wouldn't be there long—that wasn't why she'd come here. She remembered driving by this place every day and, since the summer, there had been a LOST DOG poster duct-taped to the side of the covered shelter over the bench. *There are two possibilities for why it's still there*, she thought. *The dog had been found and the owners had forgotten about the sign, or the dog had never been found and the owners were still waiting.*

The girl approached the bench and glanced down at the man on top of it. His black beanie was pulled down over his eyes and he snored softly. She wondered where *she* would sleep tonight. The laminated surface of the poster glinted in the light from the crouching sun. The text read:

LOST DOG!
Spaniel
Responds to Bowie
Call 000-456-8349 if found.
$$$ REWARD

There was a large, faded picture of the dog below the message. He was cute and looked young. She reached up and tore back

the tape holding the poster to the plywood wall of the shelter and pulled it off. She ran her thumb over the dog's 2D face.

"Did you run away, too?" she whispered.

The girl folded the poster as best she could and stuffed it in her pocket, then turned and started walking away from the bus stop. She didn't know exactly where she was going, now. The stores that crowded the streets glowed invitingly through their wide windows, but she knew she would only be torturing herself if she went inside. It wasn't like she could actually buy anything.

Soon enough, her feet carried her away from the shops and their tantalizing products, close to the edge of town. She was now atop a concrete overhang, gazing down over the city's park at the red, orange, yellow, and green treetops. She ran her hands through her long brown hair, pulling it back to let the cold wind touch every part of her face. The girl took a deep breath of the icy air and felt a shiver wrack her. She could just see the covered roof of the slide that used to be her favorite thing on the playground as a kid. The sunset tinted everything with a deeper orange hue, like a honey glaze on a dry piece of toast: sweeter, but still bland.

She leaned forward against the frozen black metal railing holding her back from the twenty foot drop, letting its hard edges press through her too-thin jacket, into her chest. When she exhaled, her breath was a long cloud in the air, as if it was being dragged out of her by the wind. It reminded her of the smoke her grandfather used to puff from his cigarettes.

Probably why he's dead, she thought.

Suddenly, there was a tap on her shoulder. She spun around to find a middle-aged man grinning at her. He was wearing a puffy winter jacket, which she thought made him look like a blue Marshmallow Man, and a red cap with a logo of yellow mountains, even though the temperature was dropping with the sun and his ears were bright pink from the cold.

Tourist.

He held his iPhone towards her. It was on the camera setting.

"Sorry to bother you," said the man. "Would you mind..?" he gestured to a short, plump woman and two children, helplessly bundled up in many layers, standing by her side.

The girl blinked at them, then looked at the phone in his hand. She reached for it.

"Sure."

She held it firmly between her numb fingers. It was nice. New. Probably cost a lot. All at once, her empty pockets felt too light.

I wish I'd planned this. Being... where I am. I wish I'd had time to grab some stuff.

She thought of her room, her shelves full of books, her desk, on top of which she had planned a few days ago to finish her latest science project but hadn't gotten to. (Though, she guessed that didn't matter anymore.) She thought of the band posters on her walls, one of which was new—from a concert she had gone to a couple of weeks ago. Her favorite band. She thought of her bed and the blue and green quilt her aunt had made for her and how the golden sun would probably be bathing it now. This used to be her favorite time of day.

The girl looked back up to where the man stood, but he wasn't there. She glanced to the side and found him herding his family towards the overlook's railing. She noticed that one of the kids was holding a donut in his grubby grip. He took a bite of it, and cream spilled from inside. Her stomach clenched with hunger, and her mouth filled with saliva, but she swallowed it back. She bit her lip and looked back down at the phone shamefully. Never before had something in a messy little kid's hands looked so appetizing. How long had it been since she'd last eaten? She didn't remember. Yesterday, at dinner, maybe?

It's going to take a lot longer before I start begging for food from kindergarteners. But...

Her breath caught in her throat.

But I could...

"Okay, we're ready."

The father's voice pulled her back. She looked up at him and momentarily met his gaze. It was brimming with contentment. It suddenly felt vital to look away.

"Right."

The family was all lined up, mother and father arm in arm, kids in front of them, wiping their runny noses on their gloves.

"Are you ready?" asked the girl.

"Yes," replied the man, his grin widening to show his straight teeth. "Perfect spot for a postcard photo, right?"

The girl forced herself to look him in the eye again. "Yeah..." She held up the phone. She hoped the family couldn't tell her hands were shaking.

"Smile, honey!" The mother patted the donut boy's shoulder.

"...Perfect."

And through the camera, it *was* perfect. She snapped the photo. Perfect picture. Perfect family.

As if I'd know what that looks like.

"Did you get it?" the father beamed.

"Yep." The girl lowered the phone.

This shouldn't hurt them...They've got it all, anyway, right?

The man started to move forward to retrieve his device, but she held her hand out, gesturing for him to stop. He did.

"Wait," she said, heart pounding. "Let's take another. Turn and face the view. I think it will look good."

"Okay!" the family obediently turned their backs to her.

"What a view it *is*!" the mother remarked, and, after a beat, "Okay, we're ready!"

"Okay," the girl breathed, "say 'cheese.'"

But she didn't hold up the phone. She spun on her heel and

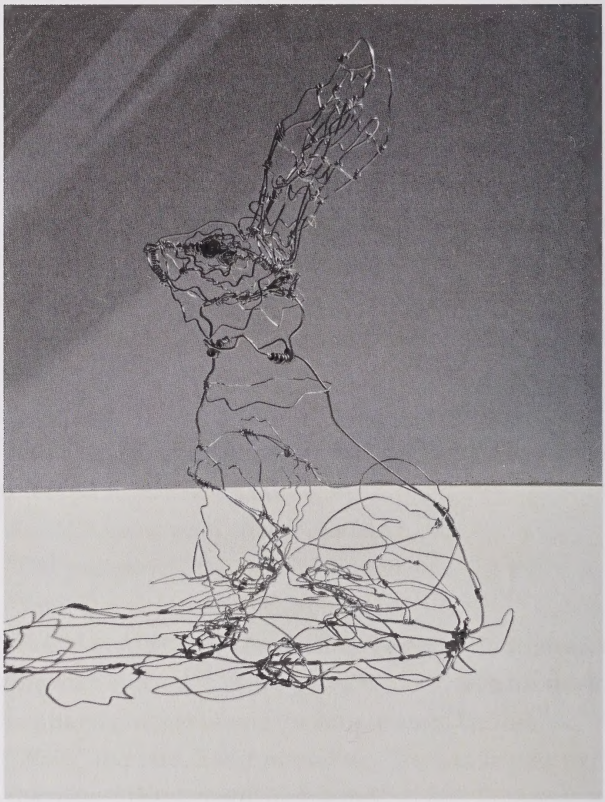
ran. For a few moments, all she could hear was her sneakers slamming on the pavement. Then the shouts.

"Hey! Girl! Get back here with my phone! Stop!"

But she didn't. She never stopped.

Still Rabbit

Haylie Lively



October Eve

Laura Dame

Broken blinds butcher the streetlight,
meddling with the trajectory of its moon
into the room, across the air, and onto her face.

Her eyelashes cast crescent shadows onto her freckly cheeks.
We flash our wounds at each other and play spot the difference.
Some sort of whisper echoes like thunder between us.

An evergreen candle sniffs at the quiet of no one else awake.
Heat flushing, we dip our shaking toes into the flames.
The stomping feet upstairs and the bass of our music

as much a queer blur as my body near to hers.
Time has sliced itself open for us. We dwell in the cut:
blushing at each other, throwing sugar in the gash.

Does she make-believe the same wants as me?
I could move my hand one inch and the whole roof would blow off.
We'd watch the lightning come down—craning our necks for the
strike.

Ethereal Landscape

Harley Burns

Successful Dreamer

Ixa V. Sigler

Look at the man with the shiny shoes. Such a gentleman, he is, with his buttoned shirt and empty soul. Oh, he's not an artist, but trains don't run on art. They run on gentlemen with buttoned shirts and shiny shoes. They run on laborers with dirty coats and callused hands. They certainly don't run on art. Still, the man is in dire possession of a notebook and a dream. It isn't a very good dream, no, but dreams don't run on practicality. His drabblings aren't shiny like his shoes, but that doesn't matter. He's not an artist. His friends laugh politely when they read it, and then they forget about it, and it doesn't matter, because he's not an artist and dreams don't run on quality. It certainly doesn't matter, because it couldn't matter, because he has callused hands and a buttoned shirt and he's not an artist. Art doesn't run on quality. He flips through his notebook, and he rips out a page and then rips out a few more. It doesn't matter. He stays up late scribbling and drabbling and none of it is good, and it doesn't matter because he's not an artist. The world doesn't run on art, after all. Oh, he's not a gentleman, but the world doesn't run on gentlemen. It runs on pathetic, heaving messes with buttoned shirts and shiny shoes. His friends pretend to smile, and forget about him, and it doesn't matter. The man sitting opposite him on the train says his shoes are very shiny. He pretends to smile. He wants to throw his notebook away, but he can't because he's not an artist. He's pathetic, and he pretends to smile, and his life runs on shiny shoes. It doesn't matter. God, it doesn't matter. His heart isn't strong like his hands. His shoes are very shiny. It couldn't matter, because he's not an artist and he has work tomorrow. He's certainly not an artist.

For I Will Love My Cold and Broken Body

Nilah Wharton

tomorrow, I will come home at six in the
evening and I will
love
my cold and broken body

cotton print and nettles, I will look at the space between
my heart and the things that
ache and sting, I will
glow the sunlight of a smile, I will love the
chill
in my teeth
I will take the bitter taste, the pressed powder

I will swallow it

for I will love my cold and
broken body

if it's through sickness and through
health, then I will wed the
spaces
between my bones

hold them tender when they cry
cradled, a baby born of
hours stood walking

I will marry all those bitter parts of me

a ring and I do to my comforter waiting, I will
walk my sore legs to bed, press a
kiss
to their forehead
play at being old lovers

I will love my cold and broken body

The Gift

Elizabeth Ivey

The Lunchroom

Hannah Shabaan

I glow when I menstruate. Boys are moths, and I am the flame they fly into. It's a joke, really. That I would be more attractive to these stinking, perverted, poorly-dressed boys when my stomach is twisting with cramps so bad I feel twinges of pain through my legs.

I speed-walk through the halls, weaving between the other kids not moving fast enough.

"Louise!" a familiar voice calls out through the ambient hum of the hall. I stop and scan the mass of bodies behind me, catching sight of Jason. He towers over the crowd, wearing his customary smile as he makes his way towards me.

Jason is my beginning-of-lunch friend. We have a deal. I give him money for two orders of fries—one for me and one for him. He waits in line and gets the food for both of us while I sit. I like Jason. He never forgets my ketchup. And he's never been weird about the fact he has a crush on me. He's content with being friends.

We make it to the table where I see Alicia and Marquez already sitting. I drop my backpack under the bench before sliding in next to my bestie. "I love your dress," Alicia says.

"Thank you. It makes my itty-bitty titties look not so itty-bitty. Plus, I couldn't wear pants today. I'm riding the crimson wave,'" I respond dryly. Alicia laughs while Jason and Marquez exchange confused glances.

Jason plunks down his backpack and asks, "Riding the crimson wave?"

"I'm on my period, Jason," I say, grinning fiendishly as I hand him our lunch money. I relish the look on his face—shock and then embarrassment, followed by disgust. Boys are so stupid.

"I gave you extra—can you get me a brownie, please?"

Jason nods before rushing away.

"Ooh, can I have one?" Marquez points to my cool honey Altoids, peeking out of my purse.

I sigh and open them.

"You can have *one*."

My mouth drops open in disgust and horror as this kid touches *every single one* of the mints before finally plucking one up and popping it into his mouth.

"Marquez—are you fucking kidding me right now?"

Marquez throws his hands up innocently and asks, "What I do?"

"You touched every single mint with your grubby little fingers!" I shriek. I can feel my face turning red from how irritated I am. "Marquez, I am banishing you from the table," I proclaim, crossing my arms and turning my nose up like a queen dismissing her subject. If there's one thing I don't have on my period, it's patience for boys.

"Alicia, I hate him," I say, turning to her. But she's on her phone, tears running down her face. Her caked-on makeup is now ruined with the dark streaks of her mascara. "Oh, no, what happened?"

She turns, and when she looks at me, the floodgates open. My best friend drops her phone onto the table with a loud *thunk*. It promptly bounces off the table and onto the ground, the back of the phone and battery popping out upon impact. She throws her face in her hands and starts wailing like a baby. Immediately, my arms are around her, ever the caregiver. "Shhh, take a deep breath, dude. Did someone die?" Marquez gets up and puts the pieces of Alicia's phone on the table while I try to comfort my friend.

"He... he b-b-broke up with meeeeee," Alicia says between sniffles, and immediately resumes her sobbing.

I stroke her hair as she cries, sighing as I comfort my friend.

Davon started dumping Alicia at least once a week since school started. That's why I carry makeup wipes in my purse now— to wipe away the damage that asshole wreaks on my friend on a regular basis.

Jason returns, approaching cautiously like we're a pair of wild animals. *What happened?* he mouths.

Davon, I mouth back. Jason makes a pained face, then slides me my brownie, fries, and ketchup packets. And when he sees me eyeing his berry juice, he slides that to me too, smiling softly and avoiding my eyes.

I unwrap myself from Alicia and reach into my purse. "Here," I say, handing her a mirror and the makeup wipes. "Take some deep breaths and fix your makeup. It might be a good idea to wash your face with some cold water in the bathroom. I'd go with you, but I'm starving."

Alicia nods and says, "I'll stay here," until she opens the mirror. "Never mind, I'll be back," she says, climbing off the bench and hurrying off to the bathrooms.

I turn to my food and begin chowing down, as the conversation and general noise of the lunchroom fades to a buzz.

As the oldest of my mom's three daughters, I had to learn how to tune out background noise at a very early age to maintain my sanity. My middle sister Sadie was a baby banshee. My mother has a picture dated August 18, 2000, just eight days after the birth of my youngest sister. Sadie and I are sitting at the kitchen table, both of us screaming our heads off. Mouths open wide, eyes squinted, cheeks shining with tears. I have both of my hands in my hair, pulling it for dramatic effect. I remember that day. Sadie would not stop crying. There was nothing she needed, and we didn't know what she wanted. She was just being her normal, ear-shattering, banshee-self. Her death scream marked the end of my patience for the day, and I started crying too, yelling at her to be quiet. My poor mother listened to my woes, rocking my newest sister in her arms.

"Mama, why won't she be quiet? I'm s-so t-tired of her screaming! Please make her stop," I begged. Sadie saw my building outburst and I guess she thought we were now in competition, because as I was yowling, her own screams got louder and louder. I watched Mama as she closed her eyes, took a deep breath, and walked away. When she came back, her own face was wet with tears. I had begun pulling my hair, and Sadie's screams reached record level highs, so Mama just smiled and snapped a picture.

"Louise," Alicia says, touching my arm and bringing me back to the lunchroom. "I've literally been talking to you for five minutes, dude," she sighs. She puts her hands on her freshly washed, bare face.

"You know I blackout when I eat. I'm sorry, though; what were you saying?" I glance at our table and see that Marquez is gone. He probably went to sit at his regular table, but I still tell myself he left because I banished him.

"It doesn't matter," she huffs, looking off into the distance.

"Chug, chug, chug, chug," male voices chant from nearby. I turn and see Ray standing on a lunch table bench. He's holding a water bottle up in the air like a trophy. It's filled with some viscous, cloudy liquid.

"Come on, Alicia. Bye, Jason." Alicia and I grab our backpacks and sling them on before holding hands. I lead us towards the chanting, a tank plowing through other kids headed in the same direction.

We reach the table where Ray is relishing the attention he is getting. "Hey," I bark at the boy closest to me. "What's going on?"

Blake turns around and smiles. I squint my eyes at the hungry look on his face as his gaze travels down my body; my stomach twists with another excruciating cramp. If I didn't know any better, I'd think even my body was cringing at his eyes undressing me. It's not like Blake is ugly—he's actually really cute, with dirty blonde,

Bieber hair and pretty blue eyes. Cute enough that I texted him for two weeks and made out with him at Relay for Life last year. It was fine until he started feeling me up, grabbing at my breasts. I pushed his hand away, only for him to slide one between my legs. So, I bit his lip, hard enough to draw blood.

We stopped talking after that.

"I had a dream about you last night, Louise," Blake responds instead of answering my question, still leering at me.

I roll my eyes and cup my hands around my mouth before yelling, "Ray, what the hell are you doing?"

Ray turns towards me and yells back, "Everyone hawked loogies in this bottle, and I'm gonna drink it!"

His friends cheer as the rest of the gathered crowd collectively lets out an, "Ewwww." I gag on reflex but still stay to watch as he twists off the bottlecap, tilts back his head, and chugs the entire thing. Ray smiles before he starts gagging himself. He pushes through kids as he books it to the nearest trash can.

Alicia and I are already off to our sitting spot, arms linked, as the sound of retching fades into the normal lunchroom hum.

We make our way up the steps to the circular path surrounding the lunchroom. Halls guarded by adults looking miserable or trying too hard to be cool shoot off from the path. The lunchroom is the center of the school—its pulsating heart. We eat here. We gather here for assemblies. We dance here during cotillion. In the universe of my high school, the lunchroom is the sun.

"How's your mom?" Alicia asks. We sit directly across from the entrance to the school, a sea of teenagers separating us from the outside world. Out there, parents have jobs or hobbies or friends. They have lives. But not my mom. At least, not right now. Living with bipolar depression means living in cycles. The highs are impossibly high, just as the lows are impossibly low. And lately, the only time my mother deigns to leave the house is to take us to and from school.

At first, I ignore her question. But Alicia is persistent. She pokes me in the ribs, hard. "I asked you a question, bitch. Talk to me."

Knowing her, she won't stop bugging me about it. I sigh and give in, deciding on the truth. She can always tell when I'm lying. "Same. Worse, actually. My uncle and May have been helping, but you know how I feel about him."

Alicia makes a sound of disgust. "Men like him and my stepdad deserve to be shot in the head," she spits.

I look at her face, seeing the pain and shame hidden beneath the anger. *Like looking into a mirror,* I think to myself. She meets my eyes, and for a second, we just stare at each other. Not sisters by blood, but sisters by the bodies we were born into.

"They deserve worse than that."

The first time I remember meeting my uncle, I was six. His daughter, my favorite cousin, was living with us and about to graduate from high school. He came for her graduation and my mom let him stay with us. I didn't know it at the time, but my uncle was one of the first men to leave a crack in my mother. Why she would let him around me and my two small sisters, both of whom were under three, I have no idea. But she did.

She found me in my room after it happened. I don't remember going to my room. But mom found me there. Sitting on my bed looking very small and staring at the wall. And when I told her what happened, her anger broke me from my stupor.

"You did nothing wrong, Louise. This is not your fault."

Shaking the memory from my head, I focus on my anger instead. I have a lot of anger lately. Especially at my mom. "She doesn't clean. She doesn't cook. She doesn't go grocery shopping. She doesn't even get out of fucking bed. All she does is sleep and watch *Investigation Discovery.* And because she is so fucking checked out, she lets her pedo brother take me, of all people, grocery shopping. Because he is the only one who will take me, and if I don't do it, we starve.

May helps. He isn't bad when she's around. But just being around him... I hate it. I hate him. I hate my mom for being the way she is. Fuck, I hate my life." Before I can stop them, tears spill down my face. Sniffling, I quickly wipe them away and close my eyes. I take a few deep breaths, because if I don't, I will be a blubbering mess like Alicia was earlier. Alicia is comfortable letting the world see her pain. I am not. "I don't want to talk about this anymore," I say.

"Okay." Alicia's warm fingers grasp my hand and give me a squeeze. I squeeze back, and then she's pulling me into a rib-cracking hug. "One day," she whispers, "one day, we'll be grown, living in our own loft downtown, with too many cats. I'll take care of us, and you'll protect us. And we'll be happy." She kisses my cheek, something she's never done, before breaking our embrace.

"So, you're a dike? Why am I not surprised?" Blake is walking up the steps towards us, arms swinging, and a cocky smile plastered on his face. How long he was there and how much he heard, I have no idea. But my anger is back in full force.

"I like boys *and* girls—just not you," I say as I stand and look down my nose at him.

Blake's smile drops as he makes his way towards me. He's only a few inches taller, but it's enough that he's staring down at me. It's clear he's using the little bit of height he has on me to intimidate me, but I stand my ground. That is, until he reaches out a hand and runs blunt fingers down my arm. The memory of the first unwanted touch I received is fresh in my mind, and I step back in response. Blake's smile returns, seeing the effect his touch has on me. Before I know it, his hand is gripping my arm and he's pulling me towards him. His mouth smashes into mine. His hands run down my body and roughly grab my ass as he rubs his budding erection against me.

And I am frozen. His tongue forces its way into my mouth. And I don't bite him this time. No, I just stand there like a statue and take it. The world goes quiet, and I'm six years old again.

Just as suddenly as he's on me, he's yanked back. Alicia is

on him, an arm wrapped around his throat. He backs up, hands trying to pull her off. But behind him are the steps, and soon they're tumbling down them. I stand there frozen for another moment. And then my body starts moving before my mind can catch up. I briefly register Alicia on her back, pinned beneath Blake's still flailing body. Somehow, she's managed to wrap her legs around him too. I watch as she straightens her body and begins choking him out with a move we learned in gym class. His arms flail as he tries to break from her grasp, those pretty blue eyes of his now bloodshot and bulging.

Students in the lunchroom surround us. Their phones are out, there's whooping, but I don't fully register the commotion. No, the only thing I see is the boy who has touched me without my consent, not once, but twice. One second, I'm standing over Blake, and the next, I'm straddling him, Alicia still beneath him, smashing my fist into his now purple face like a hammer over and over again. Blood rushes from his nose as I vaguely register a crunch sounding in my ear. The sound of my punches is wet, blood spraying every time my fist makes contact. My vision blurs as angry tears shoot from my eyes like bullets, mixing with the blood now covering his face. And there's screaming. No words, just screaming. My screaming.

I don't know how long passes before teachers push their way through the crowd, but eventually, an arm wraps around my waist and hauls me off Blake. I throw my head back, panicking at yet another unwanted touch and crunch sounds. The arms drop me, and I turn to see my history teacher, Mr. Littlejohn, holding his nose and staggering back. A quick look around and I see the school resource officer walking towards me, a hand on his taser gun.

I put my hands up and back away. "Don't touch me. Don't touch me. I'll go with you just, please, don't touch me," I sob. But the officer is still coming at me. Panic has me screaming now. "Please, please, don't touch me. I won't hurt anyone; I won't fight just don't—"

The officer grabs one of my hands and turns me, slapping handcuffs on my wrists. I struggle to get away, screaming and

screaming, my voice cracking from the strain.

I can't see or hear; all I feel is the biting cold of the handcuffs cutting into my wrists. And then the officers' arms wrap around me, forcing my body to still against my will.

Eventually, I stop moving. The adrenaline has done its job, and my body gives out. The officer releases me, and I fall to my knees. Pain shoots through them, and I can feel the cuts on my knuckles from the beating I gave Blake. Moisture between my legs tells me I've bled through my tampon and underwear, my thighs slipping against each other.

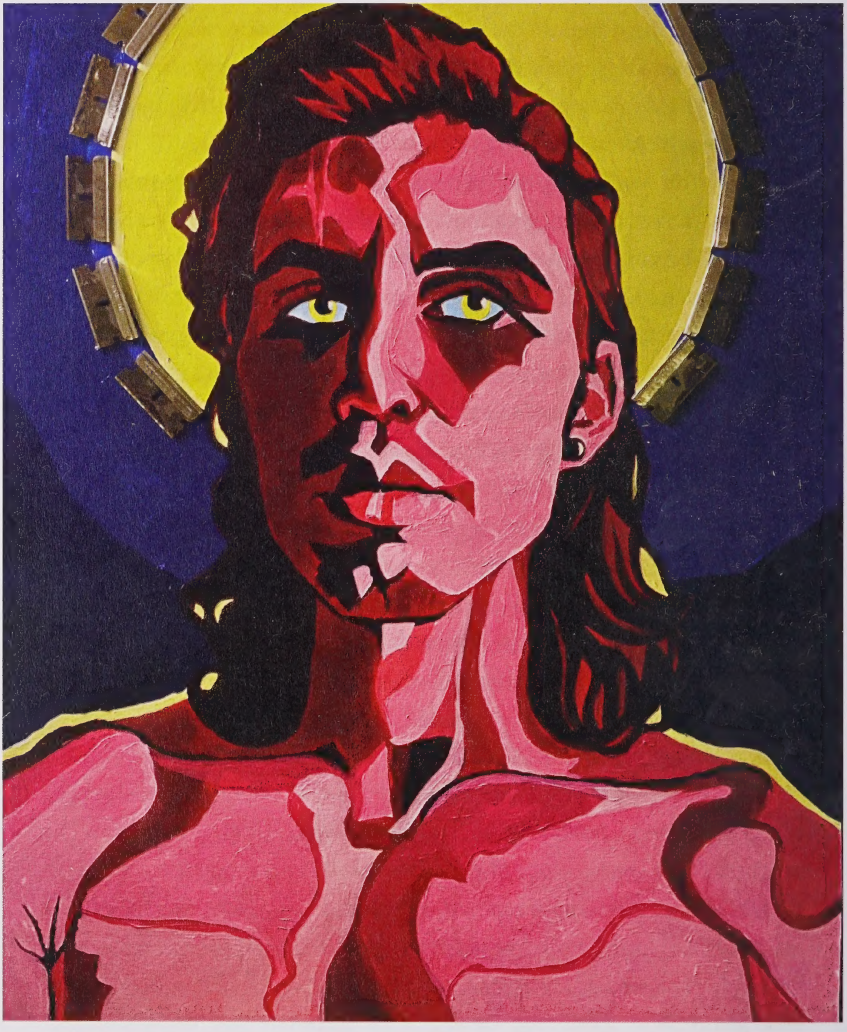
The janitors have already done their job, resetting the lunchroom for the next batch of kids. Blake is still lying on the floor, the school nurse on her knees next to him. A small red spot on his shirt tells me that, just as he bled on me, I've bled on him. Alicia is sitting on the steps, talking to the Principal, Mr. Littlejohn, and another administrator I don't know. EMTs arrive and haul Blake onto a stretcher. He groans when they move him, his face a bloody pulp. I stare at the spot where he had lain, focusing on the small pool of blood and little white things that look like teeth.

I smile, feeling a giggle rising in my throat. And then I'm laughing. Alicia, Mr. Littlejohn, and the administrators turn to look at me. Alicia's face is blank, but she gives me a wink, while the others stare in horror. I'm hysterical now, laughing so hard, my sides ache.

I glow when I menstruate. Usually, I am a flame. But today? Today, I was an inferno.

Surrender into Pain

James Piraeus Martin



Teacup

Teddy Dillon

CHARACTERS

TEACUP (anxious):

He pretends he's English. He is an antique from Scotland.

COFFEE POT (calm):

American. He focuses on being helpful.

WILL: early thirties, American lawyer, laid back, a little weird.

SETTING

The kitchen of WILL's house, Saturday morning.

(COFFEE POT wakes up to the coffee timer, but the coffee machine has no filter, water, or coffee grounds. TEACUP was left out.)

COFFEE POT: *(groggily)* News this week?

TEACUP: Ukraine stopped Russian advances with the addition of U.S.-made tanks to the front, economists for the U.S. predict a downturn, and an uncle made ten thousand on Bitcoin in two hours.

COFFEE POT: How are the ladies at work?

TEACUP: He got two texts this week from Cindy—they were about work though. He and Janis went out for drinks. All we know about the third date is Laura and he went out for dinner Thursday.

COFFEE POT: So, he's been a regular socialite after all?

TEACUP: He's certainly improving the quality of the company he keeps. I imagine he's got to settle down soon, though; otherwise, he'll never be normal.

COFFEE POT: Do we want normal?

TEACUP: I don't know. I get used two times a week, but

there's been some uneasiness about the settling down thing. The fancy silverware says he's bonkers, but we know his dad didn't settle until he was thirty. His mom married him in her mid-twenties. How off can we be?

COFFEE POT: I don't know, but if I have to put up with Folgers one more time, I'm going to *lose* it. I swear, every time one of those women he brings over with him looks at the state of the kitchen, they faint. It turns prospects into losses.

TEACUP: I imagine they don't like it much here in America, then? It's weird so many British people work in an American company.

COFFEE POT: You ask me. All I can say is this: even if it's Folgers, I'm glad he's drinking something American.

TEACUP: Don't go off on your love ballad for the American breweries. Brits do a decent job too.

COFFEE POT: How would you know? You're Scottish! You should be ashamed to say you're British.

TEACUP: Brits made modern law, held off the Nazis, and, until recently, had the Queen.

COFFEE POT: Here he comes. What do you think it'll be? Earl Grey or English breakfast?

(WILL enters yawning.)

WILL: Well, hello there, COFFEE POT and Mr. TEACUP. How are we?

COFFEE POT: Wishing I were *brewing*, as usual.

TEACUP: So happy to see you, sir! How did the date go Thursday?

WILL: Splendid!

TEACUP: Splenda? Oh no! Sir, I must insist. If we have tea, we must do it *properly*—only real sugar.

WILL: Splendid! Splendid. It means well, Mr. TEACUP.

TEACUP: Oh! Oh. I see; it must be one of those American turns of phrase—"slang," I believe it's called these days.

WILL: It's not slang. You should know it. You're *British*. I better put you in the microwave.

TEACUP: *(anxious)* No, sir. No! I do not want to go into the micro. Absolutely not! It's so unfair. My handles get too hot, and then *she* talks to me, practically *gloating*. It's like being in a jail cell.

WILL: I'll stop you right there, Mr. Teacup. I was just messing with you. *(laughing)* I'll stick the Pyrex in there.

TEACUP: The Pyrex. No! Don't do that to her.

WILL: Why not? She's made of glass, so she won't overheat on the handles. Unless she doesn't like the micro, either.

(WILL fills the Pyrex with water and puts her in the microwave. He turns the microwave on while silencing the other kitchenware and appliances with a wave. TEACUP wiggles his handle at the COFFEE POT.)

COFFEE POT: Will, we feel concerned. We are worried for you. We want you to know that we care but that this whole thing where you go on dates and never get into anything serious scares us. We are worried!

TEACUP: I was about to say as much before I was interrupted.

COFFEE POT: Anyways... Will.

TEACUP: Sir.

COFFEE POT: *(Irritated)* Fine. Sir. It would help if you settled down. Pick one of them and focus on her. It would help to decide who you want to spend the rest of your life with.

WILL: Easy for you to say. You've never been in a relationship.

COFFEE POT: But we are part of a family, Will. We have been together—this kitchen has lived together—for a long time. And while we feel you are a great owner—

TEACUP: —Really great.

COFFEE POT: —We need stability. We feel you need someone to share your life with long-term.

WILL: And this is how we do it? Is this an intervention? *(laughing)* Dating Anonymous?

COFFEE POT: This isn't a joke, Will! You only recently recovered enough to get a real adult job—something you've never had before. We can't just sit by and watch you have another breakdown.

WILL: You're worried! You're worried?

COFFEE POT: Yes! How do we know if you will keep your job, get married, or have kids?

WILL: You won't! But what the hell am I supposed to do? You think I like this? Did I ask for this? Neither of you would last a day in my shoes! You wouldn't be able to take it!

COFFEE POT: Take it! Take it? We depend on you, Will! If you fail, we fail too!

TEACUP: We want to... We need to help you, sir!

WILL: *(exasperated)* Well, how are the both of you going to help me!?

TEACUP: (*mix between placating and soothing)* Settle down, sir.

WILL: Well, I don't know if I *want* to settle down!

COFFEE POT: Will... Sir. You have to. Everybody does eventually.

WILL: Settle down. Settle down. I've gotta be insane getting relationship advice from kitchenware.

(Microwave beeps. WILL grabs a portable coffee thermos, pours the hot water in, spills some on himself, jumps back, and hits his hand on the TEACUP. The TEACUP falls to the floor and breaks.)

COFFEE POT: TEACUP!

WILL: Shit!

Speck

Laura Dame

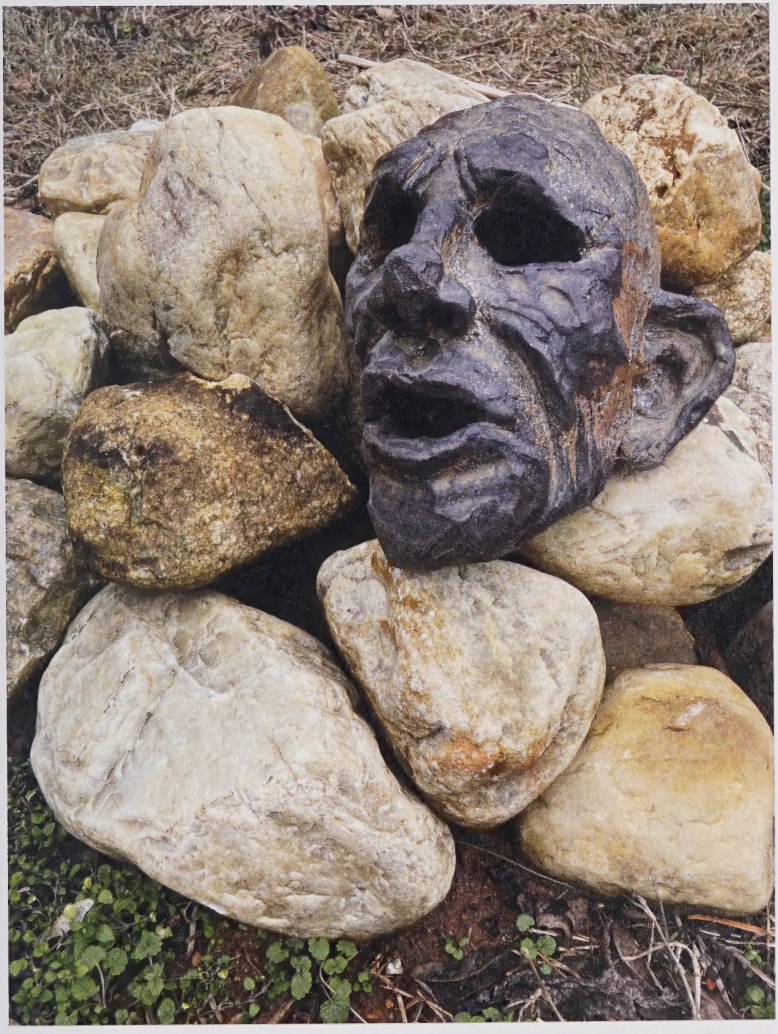
I Hate It Here at My Desk

Frank Henry

I hate it here at my desk
Staring at the houses to the "west"
Wondering where I'd be at my best
All so the sky could fall
And crush the men who won their lives
In what is basically a poker game
Except the hands are always the same
Because aces and kings are kept
In the vests of those who thought
The world was theirs to be bought
Though they fail to persuade the One
To let it go on
For just long enough
Whatever that's supposed to mean
The poor win in their dreams
Until those blissful wonderings
Are plucked from the clouds
And granted to you
But perhaps not me
I might be gifted
And so are you
But I am molded to my desk
Trying for greatness
While you
Humble shack dweller
Are among the ones
Who are truly blessed

Remembrance

Noah David Bell



I Met Life with a Capital L at the Corner Shop

Olivia M. Gamache

I met Life with a capital L at the corner shop.
She was busy buying blueberries
and a baguette larger than herself.

She told me that each moment
spent breathing on this earth is a moment unwasted.
That one step toward something
is a step nonetheless,
even if it requires two back.

Life with a capital L is a wise kind of girl,
blurring the edges of my vision
with her pig-tailed hair and sticker-clad cheeks.
She is a changeling, with each blink, someone new.

Lucky for me, when I met Life with a capital L,
she wore mismatched socks and plaster on her pinkie.

She mentioned the stars, whom she knows by name,
and the stain of sun on my cheeks.
When I handed her my heart, and pointed out the scars,
she planted a seed somewhere within the pulsing red.

She told me loneliness is as fleeting as herself
and that Love with a capital L is somewhere around here
— maybe in the produce aisle.

Amidst our conversation, strangers slipped past,
glancing once, then away.
She told me she had to get somewhere,
had someone to meet.

A breeze swept through the door.

When I asked when I could see her again,
she smiled a smile that etched itself
on the inside of my eyelids
and pressed a pomegranate into my hands.

Desert Cottontail

Haylie Lively

Lavender

Iris Amelia Owen

Mother didn't believe me. She said that it was my imagination; merely a child's mind playing tricks on me. She kept reminding me of all the things *her* mother had said when she herself dared to dream. My mother was not one for imagination and would say that the only books worth reading were the ones essential to my education. What she didn't understand was that I needed more than just the words of old philosophers to learn about the world. "A young woman should be impeccable, refined, and silent." But I am nothing like my mother.

My father saw me playing in the garden and smiled as I strung together daisy crowns. But he didn't see *you*, Lavender. He acted like you weren't even here, and wouldn't listen when I tried to tell him how I found you, hiding behind the bathroom mirror back in the spring. He wouldn't even listen when I tried to tell him that you saved me from all the monsters under my bed. Father just sat there, smoking his pipe and reading his paper, the headlines of William Henry Harrison's death more important than the words of his daughter. "Seeing is believing, my child," he would say. "And if you start seeing things that are not there, all sorts of dangerous diseases could affect your mind."

He didn't understand you, Lavender. None of them did. And they claimed they couldn't see you. Couldn't see your brown curls, tied up with a sparkling, golden bow to keep them from tangling in the wind. Couldn't hear the stories you told to me about fairies and knights, weaving a web of beautiful words like the spiders we would find exploring the secret hideouts in the attic. No one else saw how *real* you were. Except me. You were my best friend in the whole world, Lavender.

<><>

My family's home was built years and years ago for some great-grandfather of mine. Our lineage has lived there ever since, sheltering and suffocating inside ancient bricks and wooden boards, far from eager to explore what else the world has to offer. I much prefer genuine, fresh air to the heat of the house, always lit by a dozen fireplaces. And I would rather reside in a small, broken shack in the middle of a great, green forest than to be cooped up inside the dusty, old library all day.

Do you remember all the games we played that summer Lavender? Do you remember when we were outside one morning in July, trying to save Prince Taren from the evil Red Dragon. Normally, we would have been standing on the back porch of the house, looking out at Mother's marigolds, but not that day. That day, we were hiding amongst piles of treasure in a deep, dark cave. "What should we do first?" I asked you. "Should we confront the monster head on? Or should we try to steal some of these shining rubies before the dragon's fire melts them, taking them back to our kingdom to celebrate when we save the prince?"

You looked at me once, silently communicating your idea to me as you drew your silver sword. *Attack the dragon!* Your voice was a teardrop of snow on my cheek, Lavender. Melting instantly into my skin and falling down my face to follow a path towards my heart. I was about to draw my sword as well, when a fierce scolding pulled me out of the cave like a hangman's noose, bringing me back into the summer daylight on the back porch.

My mother said my name again, yanking the sword out of my hands, which had somehow become a long, broken stick. "What on earth are you doing out here, acting in such a vulgar manner?!"

It took me a second to adjust to my surroundings, and to focus on her face. It was similar to the feeling you get when you are woken up too early. The dreadful realization of being wrenched out of a world that is just your own. *Our* own, I mean.

"You should not be out here, behaving like a hooligan!" Mother exclaimed, staring at me as though I had just escaped a circus. A face, sharp as a hawk's curved and ravenous beak, stared down at me, my mother's bold figure casting a shadow over you, Lavender. "Now, run along inside, and memorize all of Africa's countries. And make haste, for it is almost tea time." She turned away, her petticoat and skirt swishing in the wind like a whip, her high-heeled shoes clacking on the boards of the porch like raindrops during a harsh thunderstorm.

You gazed at me, and I knew you and I were thinking the exact same thing. *Why stare at a globe made out of plaster when we can see better places through our own eyes?*

"But I was playing with Lavender, Mother!" I told her urgently, before she could open the door. "We can't just stop now!"

My mother looked around at me, sighed, and said, "Darling child, how many times must I tell you that speaking to yourself in such a way will make you unhealthy."

I wanted to tell her to have her eyes examined by the same doctor who she sent me to, because Lavender was clearly standing right beside me, the edge of her dress blowing against my ankles. I'm sure she didn't *mean* to be rude. Maybe looking at all those tiny letters on the globe made seeing life-sized things impossible.

Mother disappeared inside, expecting me to follow her, but you stopped me. You took my hand, Lavender, and you told me *don't go. Inside that house is stuffy, hot, and suffocating. Come with me out into the woods. We can find old castles there, and I'll tell you the story of Princess Anastacia. Didn't that sound so much more interesting than Africa's countries?*

"I will get into terrible trouble if Mother is to find out," I told you, wary of the way she put her hair up with dozens of sharp pins, and the way she walked like a regal wasp in flight, searching for prey to release its stinger upon.

You smiled secretly and whispered, *No one has to know.* Then you took my hand and we ran away together.

<><>

I love the air in summer. A soft silk sliding over me, blowing a gentle breeze. I could almost feel it like it was solid. I wanted to reach out and capture it, hiding it inside a jar and covering the lid, saving the warmth for a sad, winter day.

In the middle of the forest that lies at the edge of my family's property, there is a pond. It is unkempt, muddy, and full of algae. Cattails dance in circles around the perimeter of the water. Snakes bathe in the sun on top of rocks, lazy and grateful for the season's heat. But if you look closer, those clumps of algae can be beautiful mermaids; the water glitters like diamonds in the sunlight, and the snakes are dragons guarding their eggs from unwanted thieves.

We played there for hours that same afternoon, chasing after each other through the overgrown grass, climbing the old, knotted trees, and constructing leaf boats to sail across the pond. All thoughts of what I was supposed to do that day had vanished completely. It was just you and me, Lavender. As it always should be.

The sun was going down by the time we made our way back through the woods and to my house. Mother and Father were standing on the front porch, looks of relief flooding their faces like a dry desert waiting for the dam to break.

"Where were you?!" they said. "Do you have any idea what time it is?" they scolded. "What were you thinking going out into the forest alone?"

The bottom of Mother's skirt was covered in a hem of dirt that usually avoided her at all costs, unless it wanted to be subjected to a harsh scrubbing and drowning in one of the maid's washtubs. Father's naturally pristine, colorless shirt was wrinkled, and his tie was missing. They both looked absolutely disconnected from themselves.

"I wasn't alone," I told them. "I was at the pond with my

friend. I was with Lavender."

My parents stared at each other, even though you smiled up at them. They shared a secret look between them, just like you and I did sometimes.

My father knelt down next to me, looked me in the eyes, and said, "Listen to me carefully. *Lavender* is not real. She cannot stop you from getting hurt. That pond is very dangerous; it has not had proper care in years. The water plants could easily tangle you if you fell in, and you have no knowledge of swimming yet. You are not to go there again without an adult. Do you understand?"

I wanted to shake my head. *No*, he *didn't understand*. You would save me from anything, just like you saved me from those monsters that used to come in the night. But I nodded anyway, because I knew that's what he wanted.

Just smile. Say you understand. What's wrong with the occasional, tiny white lie? Sometimes there's too much color in your life. And I would give up all my rainbows for you.

"Imagination is powerful," the doctor said. It coerces you to believe things that are not true, and even if you might be conscious of that, it all feels too passionate to admit. But it was not like that with you and me. I could imagine things, yes. I could imagine seventeen sticks up against a tree as a castle, and I could imagine a little yellow bird to be a fairy godmother in disguise, but I could not have imagined my love for you. That would break my heart. No one can imagine the truth. Only what they'd *like* to be the truth. But you were standing right next to me. I could feel your breath, I could see your smile, and I could hear your heart beating. Just like mine. *You have to be real, Lavender.*

<><>

I came back to the pond at night, after my parents tripped and fell down into their dreams. The moon was my friend. She found me in the dark, just like you did, and she guided me here, with your hand in mine. Her silver eyes gazed down at me as the tall grass

brushed against my legs. Her beams sang to me with a choir of crickets that were invisible in the dark.

Now I'm here, watching the wind blow ripples across the water. Small whispers of waves that will never reach the ocean.

The ocean. Maybe we'll go there someday, Lavender, and maybe we'll see people who can *see you too.* Or maybe all we will find is seagulls, and I'm fine with that.

Your reflection looks up at me from the green, muddy water, but you make it all beautiful. I wish I could tell you exactly what you are to me, but there will never be enough words written in any language. You are a star, brightly dancing through the sky, laughing as I follow you. I will always follow you.

My friend, the moon, is getting tired. Her eyelids flutter, and her eyelashes are grey. We all must rest sometime.

Lavender. You smile at me. And I think I lose my footing.

Game Over

Lori L. Johnson

Let It Be Light

Calliope P. L. Taylor

Let it be light

Maybe he likes the smell of broken promises,
the taste of empty words.

Maybe the ash raining down
on him from all the burning bridges
warms his bed at night.

Wrapped in isolated protection,
smoke trapped inside a cloak set comfortably ablaze.

Convincing him he's not alone.

Maybe I like the feeling of suffocating.

That the smoke filling my lungs will somehow
raise me from this place.

A balloon
drifting through the sky,

the ones I watched floating
away as a child, directionless.

A tiny blimp of yellow against the vast deepening grey.
Lost.

Maybe that's why I haven't left his side yet.

Sometimes
when watching the fire
lick the air like ribbons,
I forget that it burns.

And yet I reach out,
confident in my decision.
My choice in picking you.
In playful fire and in pain.

You give me the gift of knowing
some things just won't let me in that close.

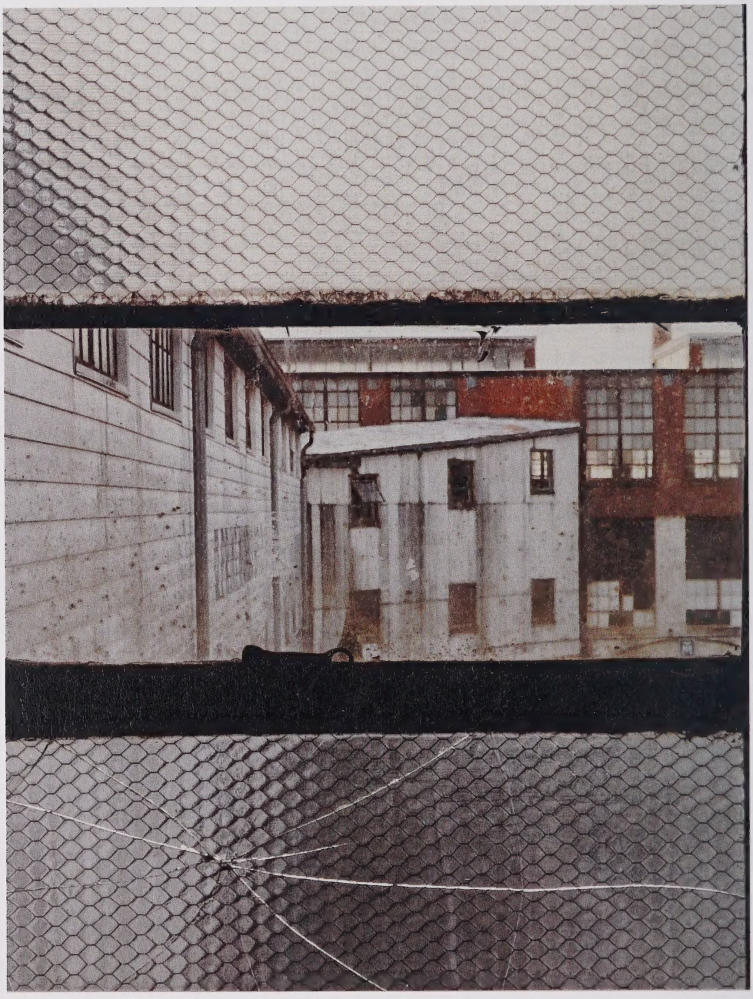
And maybe I'm a pyro or
maybe I'm just stupid.

I still embrace that flame—
Hopeful, frightened
as if the next time I try...

It will only be warm.
It will only be light.

Hollowed Be Thy

Shana Zimnoch



Nurture

Stephanie Harper

The wind whistles whispers in the trees,
lifting spirits up with rustling leaves.
The waves of sun shining down upon folds,
layers of heat are a blanketing of warmth.

Landscapes afar drift wide and empty—
Leaving behind silt songs dragging
through mountains high and valleys deeply.
Dry crevices carving divots for salty tears.

Oceans boast gently against the empty shore,
as shells house loose memories left behind—
Washing away cycles of moon's rising tides,
the soft dunes of sand roll with past in kind.

The sky listens to quell building tension.
Painted with hues blushing in delight—
From morning glow to sunset's bright shroud,
to the unapologetic clapping from clouds.

Gentle exhales of earthy moss release,
expanding journeys trailing over towering boulders.
Every breath, reluctant to breathe,
the air endues sorrow a permanent rebirth.

Relishing ease reflected in nature,
to escape the chaos of human creatures.
We tend to heart in search of peace,
in the open womb of nurture.

Marcy's Mausoleum

Andrew D. Cook

Soggy shoes right away.
The dip in the concrete does it every time.
The gospel echoes inside as the doorbell fails.
Above it, fancy glass projects rainbows that dance onto my t-shirt.
My fist slams the glass firmly thrice.
Looking down at the wilting welcome mat,
I am stunned by a gust of walnut dust
Which forces itself out of the entrance.
I shiver as if it were Uncle Bud shoving past me as a kid,
smelling of cigars and the disgusting carrot cake he always ate.
Aunt Marcy opens and greets me with stuff
I already know that Bud hated bells,
so the button was left to rust.

Footstep patterns on the floor prove that Marcy lives the same day
thousands of times over.
The kitchen counters sparkle and gleam a false sense of clean,
and the smell of vinegar outmuscled what was easy on the eyes,
like a hard but obvious truth to bear.

The hallway echoes Marcy's good memories,
Like Bud's best moments on vinyl, worn down after thousands of
listens.
It makes me cringe to hear it, pitched down and distorted after all
these years.
It must be the most used item in the house, rivaled only by the
toilet or the television.
I watch out for mousetraps topped with rotting gouda,

for sticky sections on the wooden tile,
and dust bunnies huddled to the baseboards,
untouched by anyone but a mighty microscopic civilization.

Uncle Bud's room stood cracked open, hollow, bitter.
A multitude of moldy PBJs, fried chicken, bowls of tomato soup
and cereal
stacked and scattered across the bedroom surfaces, like an aerial
view of organic cities,
some taller, some older, some farther apart.
Like a red-hot iron ball, I regurgitate my thoughts all over Marcy.
How can she let this happen?
What is wrong with her?
After years of working, she exhausts herself to let it all go south.
Marcy flies into a rage, putting up her strong younger attitude,
Accusing *me* of only visiting for money. How dare she?
I hardly look back as I walk out the door, away from the smells
and the rainbows and old promises this house made to me.
As they *always* do, my shoes rehydrate as I exit the porch.

King Arthur and Merlin

Harper K. Bolick

Picture Perfect

Laura Dame

The groundskeepers put out fresh mulch
this week and when it rained the next
the chemicals in the mulch leached
into the puddles creating a teal tea, reflecting
the cloud-soggy sun so delicately
which would've made for a good picture
framed against the grey, flat world—a splash
of color, a flash of light
but I didn't want to get the camera wet.
So I told myself I'd go back out later when it stopped raining
but it was dark when I remembered and the teal
was lost to the night and I grieved and grief
isn't really the sort of thing you can compose
into a picture a print out on luster paper.
Though it would be nice to be able to turn
a feeling that large into a thin slip of ink
that can be slid into a folder to hide
so the grief hides away instead of me.
So that even a year and a half of snaps
to the heart could be compressed down
down down into something more manageable—
maybe even something pretty to hang on the wall
like a trophy to look at and say "Look what I've accomplished."
Look what I survived.

Contributors

Noah David Bell toured the country with his musician parents as a child. Nowadays, he tries to stay put.

Harper K. Bolick is a full-time student in the Associate of Fine Arts program. Harper primarily creates art in 2D mediums.

Peyton Bray is a full time student that makes pretty sick art.

Harley Burns is studying visual art with particular interest in watercolors, collage, and oil painting.

Andrew D. Cook is a full-time second year student at A-B Tech. In May, he will graduate with an Associates in Arts with a focus in Music.

Gracie Blue Craft is a self taught artist who has grown up in Asheville. Art has always been their biggest passion and they are always trying to find new ways to tell stories through their work. Gracie enjoys digital art as well as watercolor, and other traditional medias.

Laura Dame is a former A-B Tech student and a Furman University graduate. She lives in SC and works as an editorial assistant.

Teddy Dillon is deciding whether or not to go back to school. He has an undergrad degree from the University of Mary Washington. Teddy likes to read, write, and ruck off the Parkway. He also enjoys cooking for friends.

Olivia M. Gamache is a full-time student at A-B Tech who writes poetry and short stories in her free time. She plans on transferring to a four-year university to study English.

Stephanie Harper is a mother, writer, and student at A-B Tech.

Dawn R. Harrison, a computer technologies instructor, embraces a lifelong commitment to learning, evident both in technology and art. She thrives on learning new technology and exploring and mastering new artistic mediums, experimenting with unique combinations, and finding fresh avenues of self-expression. She shares her passion and knowledge of both technology and self-expression with others.

Sydney Elizabeth Helmich is both a full-time student and barista. Sydney spends quality time with friends and family while keeping her motivation high. She likes to let her creativity out on paper, although she never took up art growing up.

Frank Henry is a student at A-B Tech who plans to transfer to UNC-Chapel Hill in the Fall of 2024, where he will focus on an undecided major centered on math and science. He plans to self-publish his first novel later this year.

Elizabeth Ivey, a self-taught mixed media artist from Southside Asheville, N.C., excels in 3D fabric collage. With over twenty years of experience, she skillfully utilizes various textile mediums like beading, felt, paper, and burlap. Crafting each original piece freehand, she employs a unique and innovative style, creating timeless artworks that revolve around themes of black life, love, and spirituality.

Lori L. Johnson is an adjunct instructor teaching digital photography at A-B Tech for the past five years. She enjoys hiking and photographing her adventures. She photographs family portraits, graduations, dance and sports in her business. She combines photography with one of her favorite activities, hiking in the mountains.

Clay N. Jones works at the A-B Tech bookstore, and in her free time enjoys reading, writing, doing art, watching the French Broad River go by and getting into minor mischief.

Haylie Lively is a full-time student in the Fine Arts program.

Ash Caleb Marquis is an Early College student who loves reading and writing and is trying to make more time for both.

James Piraeus Martin is an artist, meditation teacher, and model living in Asheville, NC. He is currently a full time art student and is working towards attaining a BA in Fine Art.

Bronwen G. McCormick works in the culinary department as an instructor and lab manager. She spends her time in the amazing WNC outdoors and attempt to do them justice in watercolor.

Bam L. McDermott is a full-time Fine Arts student who enjoys creating 2-D art with greyscale mediums. They are heavily inspired by the Baroque and Rococo eras of art and the extravagant, ornate, and detail-oriented styles.

Ronnie Z. Nielsen is a concept artist, character designer, and graphic novelist in the making. When not studying or working, they enjoy creating many different kinds of art, whether of visual, musical, or theatrical varieties. You can contact them @rolee.z on Instagram or at rolee.z.art@gmail.com

Iris Amelia Owen is an A-B Tech student who enjoys reading, writing, and existing.

Garrett E. Penland is a student at A-B Tech who enjoys movies, books, and writing in the library between classes and before or after power naps while cocooned in jackets attempting to stay warm.

Hannah Shabaan is a full-time student who likes to write sometimes.

Ixa V. Sigler is a full-time dual-enrolled student who enjoys writing, Rubik's Cubes, and sleep. He's best at the latter.

Calliope P. L. Taylor is a multi-media artist and writer with aspirations of working in film.

Nilah Wharton is a part-time student aiming for a sonography degree who enjoys writing in their free time.

Jasmine Gabrielle Willett is a senior at the Buncombe County Early College at A-B Tech. She is an avid reader and often finds herself coming up with the most captivating writing content in her dreams.

Geneva A. Witherspoon is a student who is dual-enrolled at high school and A-B Tech and is currently earning her Associate's in Arts degree. She loves to write, draw, and be creative in any way she can! When she's not doing homework, you'll probably find her reading, exercising, acting, hanging out with friends, or working on a creative project.

Grace A. Wray grew up in the art galleries in Asheville. Her paintings and technique are greatly influenced by the artists of these galleries and her father, who is also a painter. Her paintings are the result of the wisdom of her father and her community.

Shana Zimnoch dabbles in various artistic pursuits, from crafting the written word to exploring mixed media creations. Originally hailing from the South Jersey marshlands, she now finds inspiration in the vibrant community of Asheville. Shana earned her BA in Literature with minors in Art and Anthropology from Stockton University.

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ENG 125: Creative Writing

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